

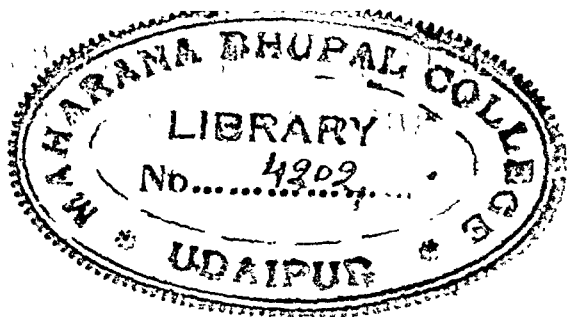
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THE ART OF LETTERS

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TO
J. C. SQUIRE

MY DEAR JACK,

You were godfather to a good many of the chapters in this book when they first appeared in the *London Mercury*, the *New Statesman*, and the *British Review*. Others of the chapters appeared in the *Daily News*, the *Nation*, the *Athenæum*, the *Observer*, and *Everyman*. Will it embarrass you if I now present you with the entire brood in the name of a friendship that has lasted many New Year's Eves?

Yours,
ROBERT LYND.

STEYNING,
30th August, 1920.

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I.—MR. PEPYS

MR. PEPYS was a Puritan. Froude once painted a portrait of Bunyan as an ex-Cavalier. He almost persuaded one that it was true till the later discovery of Bunyan's name on the muster-roll of one of Cromwell's regiments showed that he had been a Puritan from the beginning. If one calls Mr. Pepys a Puritan, however, one does not do so for the love of paradox or at a guess. He tells us himself that he "was a great Roundhead" when he was a boy, and that, on the day on which King Charles was beheaded, he said: "Were I to preach on him, my text should be—'the memory of the wicked shall rot.'" After the Restoration he was uneasy lest his old schoolfellow, Mr. Christmas, should remember these strong words. True, when it came to the turn of the Puritans to suffer, he went, with a fine impartiality, to see General Harrison disembowelled at Charing Cross. "Thus it was my chance," he comments, "to see the King beheaded at White Hall, and to see the first blood shed in revenge for the blood of the King at Charing

appetite either. He reminds one in some respects of the poet in Browning's "How it strikes a Contemporary," save that he had more worldly success. One fancies him with the same inquisitive ferrule on the end of his stick, the same "scrutinizing hat," the same eye for the bookstall and "the man who slices lemon into drink." "If any cursed a woman, he took note." Browning's poet, however, apparently "took note" on behalf of a higher power. It is difficult to imagine Mr. Pepys sending his Diary to the address of the Recording Angel. Rather, the Diary is the soliloquy of an egoist, disinterested and daring as a bad boy's reverie over the fire.

Nearly all those who have written about Pepys are perplexed by the question whether Pepys wrote his Diary with a view to its ultimate publication. This seems to me to betray some ignorance of the working of the human mind.

Those who find one of the world's puzzles in the fact that Mr. Pepys wrapped his great book in the secrecy of a cipher, as though he meant no other eye ever to read it but his own, perplex their brains unnecessarily. Pepys was not the first human being to make his confession to an empty confessional. Criminals, lovers and other egoists, for lack of a priest, will make their confessions to a

primness in the later years of the Diary. "His favourite ejaculation, 'Lord!' occurs," he declares, "but once that I have observed in 1660, never in '61, twice in '62, and at least five times in '63; after which the 'Lords' may be said to pullulate like herrings, with here and there a solitary 'damned,' as it were a whale among the shoal." As a matter of fact, Mr. Pepys's use of the expression "Lord!" has been greatly exaggerated, especially by the parodists. His primness, if that is the right word, never altogether deserted him. We discover this even in the story of his relations with women. In 1665, for instance, he writes with surprised censoriousness of Mrs. Penington.

There we drank and laughed [he relates], and she willingly suffered me to put my hand in her bosom very wantonly, and keep it there long. Which methought was very strange, and I looked upon myself as a man mightily deceived in a lady, for I could not have thought she could have suffered it by her former discourse with me; so modest she seemed and I know not what.

It is a sad world for idealists.

Mr. Pepys's Puritanism, however, was something less than Mr. Pepys. It was but a pair of creaking Sunday boots on the feet of a pagan. Mr. Pepys was an appreciator of life to a degree that not many Englishmen have been since Chaucer. He was a walking appetite. And not an entirely ignoble

shakes off his timidity. At a crisis he dare not confess in English even in a cipher, but puts the worst in bad French with a blush. In some instances the French may be for facetiousness rather than concealment, as in the reference to the ladies of Rochester Castle in 1665 :

Thence to Rochester, walked to the Crowne, and while dinner was getting ready, I did then walk to visit the old Castle ruines, which hath been a noble place, and there going up I did upon the stairs overtake three pretty mayds or women and took them up with me, and I did *baiser sur mouches et toucher leur mains* and necks to my great pleasure; but lord! to see what a dreadfull thing it is to look down the precipices, for it did fright me mightily, and hinder me of much pleasure which I would have made to myself in the company of these three, if it had not been for that.

Even here, however, Mr. Pepys's French has a suggestion of evasion. He always had a faint hope that his conscience would not understand French.

Some people have written as though Mr. Pepys, in confessing himself in his Diary, had confessed us all. They profess to see in the Diary simply the image of Everyman in his bare skin. They think of Pepys as an ordinary man who wrote an extraordinary book. To me it seems that Pepys's Diary is not more extraordinary as a book than Pepys himself was as a man. Taken separately nine out of ten of his characteristics may seem

ordinary enough—his fears, his greeds, his vices, his utilitarian repentances. They were compounded in him, however, in such proportion as to produce an entirely new mixture—a character hardly less original than Dr. Johnson or Charles Lamb. He had not any great originality of virtue, as these others had, but he was immensely original in his responsiveness—his capacity for being interested, tempted and pleased. The voluptuous nature of the man may be seen in such a passage as that in which, speaking of “the wind-musique when the angel comes down” in *The Virgin Martyr*, he declares :

It ravished me, and indeed, in a word, did wrap up my soul so that it made me really sick, just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife.

Writing of Mrs. Knipp on another occasion, he says :

She and I singing, and God forgive me ! I do still see that my nature is not to be quite conquered, but will esteem pleasure above all things, though yet in the middle of it, it has reluctances after my business, which is neglected by my following my pleasure. However, musique and women I cannot but give way to, whatever my business is.

Within a few weeks of this we find him writing again :

So abroad to my ruler's of my books, having, God forgive me ! a mind to see Nan there, which I did, and so back

again, and then out again to see Mrs. Bettons, who were looking out of the window as I came through Fenchurch Streete. So that, indeed, I am not, as I ought to be, able to command myself in the pleasures of my eye.

Though page after page of the Diary reveals Mr. Pepys as an extravagant pleasure-lover, however, he differed from the majority of pleasure-lovers in literature in not being a man of taste. He had a rolling rather than a fastidious eye. He kissed promiscuously, and was not aspiring in his lusts. He once held Lady Castlemaine in his arms, indeed, but it was in a dream. He reflected, he tells us:

that since it was a dream, and that I took so much real pleasure in it, what a happy thing it would be if when we are in our graves (as Shakespeare resembles it) we could dream, and dream but such dreams as this, that then we should not need to be so fearful of death, as we are this plague time.

He praises this dream at the same time as "the best that ever was dreamt." Mr. Pepys's idea of Paradise, it will be seen, was that commonly attributed to the Mohammedans. Meanwhile he did his best to turn London into an anticipatory harem. We get a pleasant picture of a little Round-head Sultan in such a sentence as "At night had Mercer comb my head and so to supper, sing a psalm and to bed."

It may seem unfair to over-emphasize the volup-

ordinary enough—his fears, his greeds, his vices, his utilitarian repentances. They were compounded in him, however, in such proportion as to produce an entirely new mixture—a character hardly less original than Dr. Johnson or Charles Lamb. He had not any great originality of virtue, as these others had, but he was immensely original in his responsiveness—his capacity for being interested, tempted and pleased. The voluptuous nature of the man may be seen in such a passage as that in which, speaking of “the wind-musique when the angel comes down” in *The Virgin Martyr*, he declares :

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tuary in Mr. Pepys, but it is Mr. Pepys, the promiscuous amourist, stringing his lute (God forgive him!) on a Sunday, that is the outstanding figure in the Diary. Mr. Pepys attracts us, however, in a host of other aspects—Mr. Pepys whose nose his jealous wife attacked with the red-hot tongs as he lay in bed; Mr. Pepys who always held an anniversary feast on the date on which he had been cut for the stone; Mr. Pepys who was not “troubled at it at all” as soon as he saw that the lady who had spat on him in the theatre was a pretty one; Mr. Pepys drinking; Mr. Pepys among his dishes; Mr. Pepys among princes; Mr. Pepys who was “mightily pleased” as he listened to “my aunt Jenny, a poor, religious, well-meaning good soul, talking of nothing but God Almighty”; Mr. Pepys, as he counts up his blessings in wealth, women, honour and life, and decides that “all these things are ordered by God Almighty to make me contented”; Mr. Pepys as, having just refused to see Lady Pickering, he comments, “But how natural it is for us to slight people out of power!”; Mr. Pepys who groans as he sees his office clerks sitting in more expensive seats than himself at the theatre. Mr. Pepys is a man so many-sided, indeed, that in order to illustrate his character one would have to quote the greater part of his Diary. He is

a mass of contrasts and contradictions. He lives without sequence except in the business of getting-on (in which he might well have been taken as a model by Samuel Smiles). One thinks of him sometimes as a sort of Deacon Brodie, sometimes as the most innocent sinner who ever lived. For, though he was brutal and snobbish and self-seeking and simian, he had a pious and a merry and a grateful heart. He felt that God had created the world for the pleasure of Samuel Pepys, and had no doubt that it was good.

II.—JOHN BUNYAN

ONCE, when John Bunyan had been preaching in London, a friend congratulated him on the excellence of his sermon. "You need not remind me of that," replied Bunyan. "The Devil told me of it before I was out of the pulpit." On another occasion, when he was going about in disguise, a constable who had a warrant for his arrest spoke to him and inquired if he knew that devil Bunyan. "Know him?" said Bunyan. "You might call him a devil if you knew him as well as I once did." We have in these anecdotes a key to the nature of Bunyan's genius. He was a realist, a romanticist, and a humorist. He was as exact a realist (though in a different way) as Mr. Pepys, whose contemporary he was. He was a realist both in his self-knowledge and in his sense of the outer world. He had the acute eye of the artist which was aware of the stones of the street and the crows in the ploughed field. As a preacher, he did not guide the thoughts of his hearers, as so many preachers do,

into the wind. He recalled them from orthodox abstractions to the solid earth. "Have you forgot," he asked his followers, "the close, the milk-house, the stable, the barn, and the like, where God did visit your souls?" He himself could never be indifferent to the place or setting of the great tragi-comedy of salvation. When he relates how he gave up swearing as a result of a reproof from a "loose and ungodly" woman, he begins the story: "One day, as I was standing at a neighbour's shop-window, and there cursing and swearing after my wonted manner, there sat within the woman of the house, who heard me." This passion for locality was always at his elbow. A few pages further on in *Grace Abounding*, when he tells us how he abandoned not only swearing but the deeper-rooted sins of bell-ringing and dancing, and nevertheless remained self-righteous and "ignorant of Jesus Christ," he introduces the next episode in the story of his conversion with the sentence: "But upon a day the good providence of God called me to Bedford to work at my calling, and in one of the streets of that town I came where there were three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, talking about the things of God." That seems to me to be one of the most beautiful sentences in English literature. Its beauty is largely due to the hungry

eyes with which Bunyan looked at the present world during his progress to the next. If he wrote the greatest allegory in English literature, it is because he was able to give his narrative the reality of a travel-book instead of the insubstantial quality of a dream. He leaves the reader with the feeling that he is moving among real places and real people. As for the people, Bunyan can give even an abstract virtue—still more, an abstract vice—the skin and bones of a man. A recent critic has said disparagingly that Bunyan would have called Hamlet Mr. Facing-both-ways. As a matter of fact, Bunyan's secret is the direct opposite of this. His great and singular gift was the power to create an atmosphere in which a character with a name like Mr. Facing-both-ways is accepted on the same plane of reality as Hamlet.

If Bunyan was a realist, however, as regards place and character, his conception of life was none the less romantic. Life to him was a story of hair-breadth escapes—of a quest beset with a thousand perils. Not only was there that great dragon the Devil lying in wait for the traveller, but there was Doubting Castle to pass, and Giant Despair, and the lions. We have in *The Pilgrim's Progress* almost every property of romantic adventure and terror.

We want only a map in order to bring home to us the fact that it belongs to the same school of fiction as *Treasure Island*. There may be theological contentions here and there that interrupt the action of the story as they interrupt the interest of *Grace Abounding*. But the tedious passages are extraordinarily few, considering that the author had the passions of a preacher. No doubt the fact that, when he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he was not definitely thinking of the edification of his neighbours, goes far towards explaining the absence of commonplace arguments and exhortations. "I did it mine own self to gratify," he declared in his rhymed "apology for his book." Later on, in reply to some brethren of the stricter sort who condemned such dabbling in fiction, he defended his book as a tract, remarking that, if you want to catch fish,

They must be groped for, and be tickled too,
Or they will not be catch't, whate'er you do.

But in its origin *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not a tract, but the inevitable image of the experiences of the writer's soul. And what wild adventures those were every reader of *Grace Abounding* knows. There were terrific contests with the Devil, who could never charm John Bunyan as he charmed

Eve. To Bunyan these contests were not metaphorical battles, but were as struggles with flesh and blood. "He pulled, and I pulled," he wrote in one place; "but, God be praised, I overcame him—I got sweetness from it." And the Devil not only fought him openly, but made more subtle attempts to entice him to sin. "Sometimes, again, when I have been preaching, I have been violently assaulted with thoughts of blasphemy, and strongly tempted to speak the words with my mouth before the congregation." Bunyan, as he looked back over the long record of his spiritual torments, thought of it chiefly as a running fight with the Devil. Outside the covers of the Bible, little existed save temptations for the soul. No sentence in *The Pilgrim's Progress* is more suggestive of Bunyan's view of life than that in which the merchandise of Vanity Fair is described as including "delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not." It is no wonder that one to whom so much of the common life of man was simply Devil's traffic took a tragic view of even the most innocent pleasures, and applied to himself, on account of his love of strong language, Sunday sports and bell-ringing, epithets that would hardly have been too strong

if he had committed all the crimes of the latest Bluebeard. He himself, indeed, seems to have become alarmed when—probably as a result of his own confessions—it began to be rumoured that he was a man with an unspeakable past. He now demanded that “any woman in heaven, earth or hell” should be produced with whom he had ever had relations before his marriage. “My foes,” he declared, “have missed their mark in this shooting at me. I am not the man. I wish that they themselves be guiltless. If all the fornicators and adulterers in England were hanged up by the neck till they be dead, John Bunyan, the object of their envy, would still be alive and well.” Bunyan, one observes, was always as ready to defend as to attack himself. The verses he prefixed to *The Holy War* are an indignant reply to those who accused him of not being the real author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He wound up a fervent defence of his claims to originality by pointing out the fact that his name, if “anagrammed,” made the words: “NU HONY IN A B.” Many worse arguments have been used in the quarrels of theologians.

Bunyan has been described as a tall, red-haired man, stern of countenance, quick of eye, and mild of speech. His mildness of speech, I fancy, must

have been an acquired mildness. He loved swearing as a boy, and, as *The Pilgrim's Progress* shows, even in his later life he had not lost the humour of calling names. No other English author has ever invented a name of the labelling kind equal to that of Mr. Worldly Wiseman—a character, by the way, who does not appear in the first edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but came in later as an afterthought. Congreve's "Tribulation Spintext" and Dickens's "Lord Frederick Verisoph" are mere mechanical contrivances compared to this triumph of imagination and phrase. Bunyan's gift for names was in its kind supreme. His humorous fancy chiefly took that form. Even atheists can read him with pleasure for the sake of his names. The modern reader, no doubt, often smiles at these names where Bunyan did not mean him to smile, as when Mrs. Lightmind says: "I was yesterday at Madam Wanton's, when we were as merry as the maids. For who do you think should be there but I and Mrs. Love-the-flesh, and three or four more, with Mr. Lechery, Mrs. Filth, and some others?" Bunyan's fancifulness, however, gives us pleasure quite apart from such quaint effects as this. How delightful is Mr. By-ends's explanation of the two points in regard to which he and his family differ in religion from those of the

stricter sort : “ First, we never strive against wind and tide. Secondly, we are always most zealous when Religion goes in his silver slippers ; we love much to walk with him in the street, if the sun shines, and the people applaud him.” What a fine grotesque, again, Bunyan gives us in toothless Giant Pope sitting in the mouth of the cave, and, though too feeble to follow Christian, calling out after him : “ You will never mend till more of you be burnt.” We do not read *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, however, as a humorous book. Bunyan’s pains mean more to us than the play of his fancy. His books are not seventeenth-century grotesques, but the story of his heart. He has written that story twice over—with the gloom of the realist in *Grace Abounding*, and with the joy of the artist in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Even in *Grace Abounding*, however, much as it is taken up with a tale of almost lunatic terror, the tenderness of Bunyan’s nature breaks out as he tells us how, when he was taken off to prison, “ the parting with my wife and four children hath often been to me in the place as the pulling the flesh from the bones . . . especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all beside. Oh, the thoughts of the hardship I thought my poor blind one might go under would break my heart to pieces ! ” At the same time, fear and

not love is the dominating passion in *Grace Abounding*. We are never far from the noise of Hell in its pages. In *Grace Abounding* man is a trembling criminal. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* he has become, despite his immense capacity for fear, a hero. The description of the fight with Apollyon is a piece of heroic literature equal to anything in those romances of adventure that went to the head of Don Quixote. "But, as God would have it, while Apollyon was fetching his last blow, thereby to make a full end of this good man, Christian nimbly reached out his hand for his sword, and caught it, saying: 'Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy! when I fall I shall arise'; and with that gave him a deadly thrust, which made him give back, as one that had received a mortal wound." Heroic literature cannot surpass this. Its appeal is universal. When one reads it, one ceases to wonder that there exists even a Catholic version of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Giant Pope is discreetly omitted, but the heroism of Christian remains. Bunyan disliked being called by the name of any sect. His imagination was certainly as little sectarian as that of a seventeenth-century preacher could well be. His hero is primarily not a Baptist, but a man. He bears, perhaps, almost too close a resemblance

of a German professor. His vehemence against the Germans for appreciating Shakespeare is strangely like a German professor's vehemence against the English for not appreciating him. "Why then," he asks,

should the Germans have attempted to lay violent hands upon our Shakespeare? It is but part of their general policy of pillage. Stealing comes as easy to them as it came to Bardolph and Nym, who in Calais stole a fire-shovel. Wherever they have gone they have cast a thievish eye upon what does not belong to them. They hit upon the happy plan of levying tolls upon starved Belgium. It was not enough for their greed to empty a country of food; they must extract something from its pocket, even though it be dying of hunger. . . . No doubt, if they came to these shores, they would feed their fury by scattering Shakespeare's dust to the winds of heaven. As they are unable to sack Stratford, they do what seems to them the next best thing: they hoist the Jolly Roger over Shakespeare's works.

Their arrogance is busy in vain. Shakespeare shall never be theirs. He was an English patriot, who would always have refused to bow the knee to an insolent alien.

This is mere foaming at the mouth—the tawdry violence of a Tory Thersites. This passage is a measure of the good sense and imagination Mr. Whibley brings to the study of Shakespeare. It is simply theatrical Jolly-Rogersm.

XIII.—GEORGE MEREDITH

(I) THE EGOIST

GEORGE MEREDITH, as his friends used to tell one with amusement, was a vain man. Someone has related how, in his later years, he regarded it as a matter of extreme importance that his visitors should sit in a position from which they would see his face in profile. This is symbolic of his attitude to the world. All his life he kept one side of his face hidden. Mr. Ellis, who is the son of one of Meredith's cousins, now takes us for a walk round Meredith's chair. No longer are we permitted to remain in restful veneration of "a god and a Greek." Mr. Ellis invites us—and we cannot refuse the invitation—to look at the other side of the face, to consider the full face and the back of the head. He encourages us to feel Meredith's bumps, and no man whose bumps we are allowed to feel can continue for five minutes the pretence of being an Olympian. He becomes a human being under a criticizing thumb. We discover that he had

a genius for imposture, an egoist's temper, and a stomach that fluttered greedily at the thought of dainty dishes. We find all those characteristics that prevented him from remaining on good terms first with his father, next with his wife, and then with his son. At first, when one reads the full story of Meredith's estrangements through three generations, one has the feeling that one is in the presence of an idol in ruins. Certainly, one can never mistake Box Hill for Olympus again. On the other hand, let us but have time to accustom ourselves to see Meredith in other aspects than that which he himself chose to present to his contemporaries—let us begin to see in him not so much one of the world's great comic censors as one of the world's great comic subjects, and we shall soon find ourselves back among his books, reading them no longer with tedious awe, but with a new passion of interest in the figure-in-the-background of the complex human being who wrote them.

For Meredith was his own great subject. Had he been an Olympian he could not have written *The Egoist* or *Harry Richmond*. He was an egoist and pretender, coming of a line of egoists and pretenders, and his novels are simply the confession and apology of such a person. Meredith concealed the truth about himself in his daily conversation ;

he revealed it in his novels. He made such a mystery about his birth that many people thought he was a cousin of Queen Victoria's, or at least a son of Bulwer Lytton's. It was only in *Evan Harrington* that he told the essentials of the truth about the tailor's shop in Portsmouth above which he was born. Outside his art, nothing would persuade him to own up to the tailor's shop. Once, when Mr. Clodd was filling in a census-paper for him, Meredith told him to put "near Petersfield" as his place of birth. The fact that he was born at Portsmouth was not publicly known, indeed, until some time after his death. And not only was there the tailor's shop to live down, but on his mother's side he was the grandson of a publican, Michael Macnamara. Meredith liked to boast that his mother was "pure Irish"—an exaggeration, according to Mr. Ellis—but he said nothing about Michael Macnamara of "The Vine." At the same time it was the presence not of a bar sinister but of a yardstick sinister in his coat of arms that chiefly filled him with shame. When he was marrying his first wife he wrote "Esquire" in the register as a description of his father's profession. There is no evidence, apparently, as to whether Meredith himself ever served in the tailor's shop after his father moved from Portsmouth to St. James's Street, Lon-

could write Tory articles in a newspaper for pay. At the same time, it is only fair to say that Meredith remains a sufficiently splendid figure in Mr. Ellis's book even when we know the worst about him. Was his a generous genius? It was at least a prodigal one. As poet, novelist, correspondent, and conversationalist, he leaves an impression of beauty, wit, and power in a combination that has no precedent.

(2) THE OLYMPIAN UNBENDS

Lady Butcher's charming *Memoirs of George Meredith* is admittedly written in reply to Mr. Ellis's startling volume. It seems to me, however, that it is a supplement rather than a reply. Mr. Ellis was not quite fair to Meredith as a man, but he enabled us to understand the limitations which were the conditions of Meredith's peculiar genius. Many readers were shocked by the suggestion that characters, like countries, must have boundaries. Where Mr. Ellis failed, in my opinion, was not in drawing these as carefully as possible, but in the rather unfriendly glee with which, one could not help feeling, he did so. It is also true that he missed some of the grander mountain-peaks in Meredith's

character. Lady Butcher, on the other hand, is far less successful than Mr. Ellis in drawing a portrait which makes us feel that now we understand something of the events that gave birth to *The Egoist* and *Richard Feverel* and *Modern Love*. Her book tells us nothing of the seed-time of genius, but is a delightful account of its autumn.

At the same time it helps to dissipate one ridiculous popular fallacy about Meredith. Meredith, like most of the wits, has been accused of straining after image and epigram. Wit acts as an irritant on many people. They forget the admirable saying of Coleridge: "Exclusive of the abstract sciences, the largest and worthiest portion of our knowledge consists of aphorisms; and the greatest of men is but an aphorism." They might as well denounce a hedge for producing wild roses or a peacock for growing tail feathers with pretty eyes as a witty writer for flowering into aphorism, epigram and image. Even so artificial a writer as Wilde had not to labour to be witty. It has often been laid to his charge that his work smells of the lamp, whereas what is really the matter with it is that it smells of the drawing-room gas. It was the result of too much "easy-goingness," not of too much strain. As for Meredith, his wit was the wit of an abounding imagination. Lady Butcher gives some

an eagle to be grateful." But then, neither can one love an eagle, and one would like to be able to love the author of *Love in the Valley* and *Richard Feverel*. Meredith was too keenly aware what an eagle he was. Speaking of the reviewers who had attacked him, he said: "They have always been abusing me. I have been observing them. It is the crueller process." It is quite true, but it was a superior person who said it.

Meredith, however, among his friends and among the young, loses this air of superiority, and becomes something of a radiant romp as well as an Olympian. Lady Butcher's first meeting with him took place when she was a girl of thirteen. She was going up Box Hill to see the sun rise with a sixteen-year-old cousin, when the latter said: "I know a madman who lives on Box Hill. He's quite mad, but very amusing; he likes walks and sunrises. Let's go and shout him up!" It does Meredith credit that he got out of bed and joined them, "his nightshirt thrust into brown trousers." Even when the small girl insisted on "reading aloud to him one of the hymns from Keble's *Christian Year*," he did not, as the saying is, turn a hair. His attachment to his daughter Mariette—his "dearie girl," as he spoke of her with unaffected softness of phrase—also helps one to realize that he was not all

Olympian. Meredith, the condemner of the "guarded life," was humanly nervous in guarding his own little daughter. "He would never allow Mariette to travel alone, even the very short distance by train from Box Hill to Ewell; a maid had always to be sent with her or to fetch her. He never allowed her to walk by herself." One likes Meredith the better for Lady Butler's picture of him as a "harassed father."

One likes him, too, as he converses with his dogs, and for his thoughtfulness in giving some of his MSS., including that of *Richard Feverel*, to Frank Cole, his gardener, in the hope that "some day the gardener would be able to sell them" and so get some reward for his devotion. As to the underground passages in Meredith's life and character, Lady Butler is not concerned with them. She writes of him merely as she knew him. Her book is a friend's tribute, though not a blind tribute. It may not be effective as an argument against those who are bent on disparaging the greatest lyrical wit in modern English literature. But it will be welcomed by those for whom Meredith's genius is still a bubbling spring of good sense and delight.

(3) THE POSTHUMOUS NOVEL

Meredith never wrote a novel which was less a novel than *Celt and Saxon*. It is only a fragment of a book. It is so much a series of essays and sharp character-sketches, however, that the untimely fall of the curtain does not greatly trouble us. There is no excitement of plot, no gripping anxiety as to whether this or that pair of lovers will ever reach the altar. Philip O'Donnell and Patrick, his devoted brother, and their caricature relative, the middle-aged Captain Con, all interest us as they abet each other in the affairs of love or politics, or as they discuss their native country or the temperament of the country which oppresses it ; but they are chiefly desirable as performers in an Anglo-Irish fantasia, a Meredithian piece of comic music, with various national anthems, English, Welsh, and Irish, running through and across it in all manner of guises, and producing all manner of agreeable disharmonies.

In the beginning we have Patrick O'Donnell, an enthusiast, a Celt, a Catholic, setting out for the English mansion of the father of Adiante Adister to find if the girl cannot be won over to reconsider her refusal of his brother Philip. He arrives in the midst of turmoil in the house, the cause of it being

a hasty marriage which Adriante had ambitiously contracted with a hook-nosed foreign prince. Patrick, a broken-hearted proxy, successfully begs her family for a miniature of the girl to take back to his brother, but he falls so deeply in love with her on seeing the portrait that his loyalty to Philip almost wavers, when the latter carelessly asks him to leave the miniature on a more or less public table instead of taking it off to the solitude of his own room for a long vigil of adoration.

In the rest of the story we have an account of the brothers in the London house of Captain Con, the happy husband married to a stark English wife of mechanical propriety—a rebellious husband, too, when in the sociable atmosphere of his own upper room, amid the blackened clay pipes and the friendly fumes of whisky, he sings her praises, while at the same time full of grotesque and whimsical criticisms of all those things, Saxon and more widely human, for which she stands. There is a touch of farce in the relations of these two, aptly symbolized by the bell which rings for Captain Con, and hurries him away from his midnight eloquence with Patrick and Philip. “He groaned, ‘I must go. I haven’t heard the tinkler for months. It signifies she’s cold in her bed. The thing called circulation is unknown to her save by the aid of

outward application, and I'm the warming-pan, as legitimately as I should be. I'm her husband and her Harvey in one.' "

It is in the house of Captain Con, it should be added, that Philip and Patrick meet Jane Mattock, the Saxon woman; and the story as we have it ends with Philip invalided home from service in India, and Jane, a victim of love, catching "glimpses of the gulfs of bondage, delicious, rose-enfolded, foreign." There are nearly three hundred pages of it altogether, some of them as fantastic and lyrical as any that Meredith ever wrote.

As one reads *Celt and Saxon*, however, one seems to get an inkling of the reason why Meredith has so often been set down as an obscure author. It is not entirely that he is given to using imagery as the language of explanation—a subtle and personal sort of hieroglyphics. It is chiefly, I think, because there is so little direct painting of men and women in his books. Despite his lyricism, he had something of an X-rays imagination. The details of the modelling of a face, the interpreting lines and looks, did not fix themselves with preciseness on his vision, enabling him to pass them on to us with the surface reality we generally demand in prose fiction.

It is as though he painted some of his best men and women upon air: they are elusive for all we know

of their mental and spiritual processes. Even though he is at pains to tell us that Diana's hair is dark, we do not at once accept the fact but are at liberty to go on believing she is a fair woman, for he himself was general rather than insistently particular in his vision of such matters. In the present book, again, we have a glimpse of *Adiante* in her miniature—"this lighted face, with the dark raised eyes and abounding auburn tresses, where the contrast of colours was in itself thrilling," "the light above beauty distinguishing its noble classic lines and the energy of radiance, like a morning of chivalrous promise, in the eyes"—and, despite the details mentioned, the result is to give us only the lyric aura of the woman where we wanted a design.

Ultimately, these women of Meredith's become intensely real to us—the most real women, I think, in English fiction—but, before we come to hand-shaking terms with them, we have sometimes to go to them over bogs and rocky places with the sun in our eyes. Before this, physically, they are apt to be exquisite parts of a landscape, sharers of a lyric beauty with the cherry-trees and the purple crocuses.

Coming to the substance of the book—the glance from many sides at the Irish and English temperaments—we find Meredith extremely penetrating in his criticism of John Bullishness, but something

of a foreigner in his study of the Irish character. The son of an Irishwoman, he chose an Irishwoman as his most conquering heroine, but he writes of the race as one who has known the men and women of it entirely, or almost entirely, in an English setting—a setting, in other words, which shows up their strangeness and any surface eccentricities they may have, but does not give us an ordinary human sense of them. Captain Con is vital, because Meredith imagined him vitally, but when all is said, he is largely a stage-Irishman, winking over his whisky that has paid no excise—a better-born relative of Captain Costigan.

Politically, *Celt and Saxon* seems to be a plea for Home Rule—Home Rule, with a view towards a “consolidation of the Union.” Its diagnosis of the Irish difficulty is one which has long been popular with many intellectual men on this side of the Irish Sea. Meredith sees, as the roots of the trouble, misunderstanding, want of imagination, want of sympathy. It has always seemed curious to me that intelligent men could persuade themselves that Ireland was chiefly suffering from want of understanding and want of sympathy on the part of England, when all the time her only ailment has been want of liberty. To adapt the organ-grinder’s motto,

Sympathy without relief
Is like mustard without beef.

As a matter of fact, Meredith realized this, and was a friend to many Irish national movements from the Home Rule struggle down to the Gaelic League, to the latter of which the Irish part of him sent a subscription in his later years. He saw things from the point of view of an Imperial Liberal idealist, however, not of a Nationalist. In the result, he did not know the every-day and traditional setting of Irish life sufficiently well to give us an Irish Nationalist central figure as winning and heroic, even in his extravagances, as, say, the patriotic Englishman Neville Beauchamp.

At the same time, one must be thankful for a book so obviously the work of a great and abundant mind—a mind giving out its criticisms like flutters of birds—a heroic intellect always in the service of an ideal of liberty, courage, and gracious manners—a characteristically island brain, that was yet not insular.

XIV.—OSCAR WILDE

OSCAR WILDE is a writer whom one must see through in order to appreciate. One must smash the idol in order to preserve the god. If Mr. Ransome's estimate of Wilde in his clever and interesting and seriously-written book is a little unsatisfactory, it is partly because he is not enough of an iconoclast. He has not realized with sufficient clearness that, while Wilde belonged to the first rank as a wit, he was scarcely better than second-rate as anything else. Consequently, it is not Wilde the beau of literature who dominates his book. Rather, it is Wilde the egoistic, æsthetic philosopher, and Wilde the imaginative artist.

This is, of course, as Wilde would have liked it to be. For, as Mr. Ransome says, "though Wilde had the secret of a wonderful laughter, he preferred to think of himself as a person with magnificent dreams." Indeed, so much was this so, that it is even suggested that, if *Salomé* had not been censored, the social comedies might never have been written. "It is possible," observes Mr. Ransome,

“that we owe *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the fact that the Censor prevented Sarah Bernhardt from playing *Salomé* at the Palace Theatre.” If this conjecture is right, one can never think quite so unkindly of the Censor again, for in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and in it alone, Wilde achieved a work of supreme genius in its kind.

It is as lightly-built as a house of cards, a frail edifice of laughter for laughter's sake. Or you might say that, in the literature of farce, it has a place as a “dainty rogue in porcelain.” It is even lighter and more fragile than that. It is a bubble, or a flight of bubbles. It is the very ecstasy of levity. As we listen to Lady Bracknell discussing the possibility of parting with her daughter to a man who had been “born, or at least bred, in a hand-bag,” or as we watch Jack and Algernon wrangling over the propriety of eating muffins in an hour of gloom, we seem somehow to be caught up and to sail through an exhilarating mid-air of nonsense. Some people will contend that Wilde's laughter is always the laughter not of the open air but of the salon. But there is a spontaneity in the laughter of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that seems to me to associate it with running water and the sap rising in the green field.

It is when he begins to take Wilde seriously as a

sentences of the play, do we not find that, while in his choice of colour and jewel and design Flaubert wrought in language like a skilled artificer, Wilde, in his treatment of words, was more like a lavish amateur about town displaying his collection of splendid gems ?

Wilde speaks of himself in *De Profundis* as a lord of language. Unhappily, he was just the opposite. Language was a vice with him. He took to it as a man might take to drink. He was addicted rather than devoted to language. He had a passion for it, but too little sense of responsibility towards it, and, in his choice of beautiful words, we are always conscious of the indolence as well as the extravagance of the man of pleasure. How beautifully, with what facility of beauty, he could use words, everyone knows who has read his brief *Endymion* (to name one of the poems), and the many hyacinthine passages in *Intentions*. But when one is anxious to see the man himself as in *De Profundis*—that book of a soul imprisoned in embroidered sophistries—one feels that this cloak of strange words is no better than a curse.

If Wilde was not a lord of language, however, but only its bejewelled slave, he was a lord of laughter, and it is because there is so much laughter as well as language in *Intentions* that I am inclined to agree

with Mr. Ransome that *Intentions* is "that one of Wilde's books that most nearly represents him." Even here, however, Mr. Ransome will insist on taking Wilde far too seriously. For instance, he tells us that "his paradoxes are only unfamiliar truths." How horrified Wilde would have been to hear him say so! His paradoxes are a good deal more than truths—or a good deal less. They helped, no doubt, to redress a balance, but many of them were the merest exercises in intellectual rebellion. Mr. Ransome's attitude on the question of Wilde's sincerity seems to me as impossible as his attitude in regard to the paradoxes. He draws up a code of artistic sincerity which might serve as a gospel for minor artists, but of which every great artist is a living denial. Disagree as we may with many of Mr. Ransome's conclusions, however, we must be grateful to him for a thoughtful, provocative, and ambitious study of one of the most brilliant personalities and wits, though by no means one of the brilliant imaginative artists, of the nineteenth century.

XV.—MR. SAINTSBURY

MR. SAINTSBURY as a critic possesses in a high degree the gift of sending the reader post-haste to the works he criticizes. His *Peace of the Augustans* is an almost irresistible incitement to go and forget the present world among the poets and novelists and biographers and letter-writers of the eighteenth century. His enthusiasm weaves spells about even the least of them. He does not merely remind us of the genius of Pope and Swift, of Fielding and Johnson and Walpole. He also summons us to Amory's *John Bunce* and to the Reverend Richard Graves's *Spiritual Quixote* as to a feast. Of the latter novel he declares that "for a book that is to be amusing without being flimsy, and substantial without being ponderous, *The Spiritual Quixote* may, perhaps, be commended above all its predecessors and contemporaries outside the work of the great Four themselves." That is characteristic of the wealth of invitations scattered through *The Peace of the Augustans*. After reading the book, one can scarcely resist the temp-

tation to spend an evening over Young's *Night Thoughts*, and one will be almost more likely to turn to Prior than to Shakespeare himself—Prior who, “with the eternal and almost unnecessary exception of Shakespeare . . . is about the first to bring out the true English humour which involves sentiment and romance, which laughs gently at its own tears, and has more than half a tear for its own laughter”—Prior, of whom it is further written that “no one, except Thackeray, has ever entered more thoroughly into the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*.” It does not matter that in a later chapter of the book it is *Rasselas* which is put with *Ecclesiastes*, and, after *Rasselas*, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. One does not go to Mr. Saintsbury as an inspector of literary weights and measures. His estimates of authors are the impressions of a man talking in a hurry, and his method is the method of exaggeration rather than of precise statement. How deficient he is in the sense of proportion may be judged from the fact that he devotes slightly more space to Collins than to Pope, unless the pages in which he assails “Grub Street” as a malicious invention of Pope’s are to be counted to the credit of the latter. But Mr. Saintsbury’s book is not so much a thorough and balanced survey of eighteenth-century literature as a confession, an almost garrulous

monologue on the delights of that literature. How pleasant and unexpected it is to see a critic in his seventies as incautious, as pugnacious, as boisterous as an undergraduate ! It is seldom that we find the apostolic spirit of youth living in the same breast with the riches of experience and memory, as we do in the present book.

One of the great attractions of the eighteenth century for the modern world is that, while it is safely set at an historical distance from us, it is, at the same time, brought within range of our everyday interests. It is not merely that about the beginning of it men began to write and talk according to the simple rules of modern times. It is rather that about this time the man of letters emerges from the mists of legend and becomes as real as one's uncle in his daily passions and his train of little interests. One has not to reconstruct the lives of Swift and Pope from a handful of myths and references in legal documents. There is no room for anything akin to Baconianism in their regard. They live in a thousand letters and contemporary allusions, and one might as well be an agnostic about Mr. Asquith as about either of them. Pope was a master liar, and Swift spun mystifications about himself. But, in spite of lies and mystifications and gossip, they are both as real to us as if

we met them walking down the Strand. One could not easily imagine Shakespeare walking down the Strand. The Strand would have to be rebuilt, and the rest of us would have to put on fancy dress in order to receive him. But, though Swift and Pope lived in a century of wig and powder and in a London strangely unlike the London of to-day, we do not feel that similar preparations would be needed in their case. If Swift came back, one can without difficulty imagine him pamphleteering about war as though he had merely been asleep for a couple of centuries ; and Pope, we may be sure, would resume, without too great perplexity, his attack on the egotists and dunces of the world of letters. But Shakespeare's would be a return from legendary Elysian fields.

Hence Mr. Saintsbury may justly hope that his summons to the modern random reader, no less than to the scholar, to go and enjoy himself among the writers of the eighteenth century will not fall on entirely deaf ears. At the same time, it is only fair to warn the general reader not to follow Mr. Saintsbury's recommendations and opinions too blindly. He will do well to take the author's advice and read Pope, but he will do very ill to take the author's advice as regards what in Pope is best worth reading. Mr. Saintsbury speaks with res-

pect, for instance, of the *Elegy on an Unfortunate Lady*—an insincere piece of tombstone rhetoric. "There are some," he declared in a footnote, "to whom this singular piece is Pope's strongest atonement, both as poet and man, for his faults as both." It seems to me to be a poem which reveals Pope's faults as a poet, while of Pope the man it tells us simply nothing. It has none of Pope's wit, none of his epigrammatic characterization, none of his bewigged and powdered fancies, none of his malicious self-revelation. Almost the only interesting thing about it is the notes the critics have written on it, discussing whether the lady ever lived, and, if so, whether she was a Miss Wainsbury or a lady of title, whether she was beautiful or deformed, whether she was in love with Pope or the Duke of Buckingham or the Duc de Berry, whether Pope was in love with her, or even knew her, and whether she killed herself with a sword or by hanging herself. One can find plenty of "rest and refreshment" among the conjectures of the commentators, but in the verse itself one can find little but a good example of the technique of the rhymed couplet. But Mr. Saintsbury evidently loves the heroic couplet for itself alone. The only long example of Pope's verse which he quotes is merely ding-dong, and might have been written by any

capable imitator of the poet later in the century. Surely, if his contention is true that Pope's reputation as a poet is now lower than it ought to be, he ought to have quoted something from the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* or *The Rape of the Lock*, or even *The Essay on Man*. The two first are almost flawless masterpieces. Here Pope suddenly becomes a star. Here he gilds his age and his passions with wit and fancy ; he ceases to be a mere rhyming moralist, a mechanician of metre. Mr. Saintsbury, I regret to see, contends that the first version of *The Rape of the Lock* is the best. One can hardly forgive this throwing overboard of the toilet and the fairies which Pope added in the later edition. We may admit that the gnomes are a less happy invention than the sylphs, and that their introduction lets the poem down from its level of magic illusion. But in the second telling the poem is an infinitely richer and more peopled thing. Had we known only the first version, we should, no doubt, have felt with Addison that it was madness to tamper with such exquisite perfection. But Pope, who foolishly attributed Addison's advice to envy, proved that Addison was wrong. His revision of *The Rape of the Lock* is one of the few magnificently successful examples in literature of painting the lily.

One differs from Mr. Saintsbury, however, less in liking a different garden from his than in liking a different seat in the same garden. One who is familiar as he is with all the literature he discusses in the present volume is bound to indulge all manner of preferences, whims and even eccentricities. An instance of Mr. Saintsbury's whims is his complaint that the eighteenth-century essays are almost always reprinted only in selections and without the advertisements that appeared with them on their first publication. He is impatient of J. R. Green's dismissal of the periodical essayist as a "mass of rubbish," and he demands his eighteenth-century essayists in full, advertisements and all. "Here," he insists, "these things fringe and vignette the text in the most appropriate manner, and so set off the quaint variety and the other-worldly character as nothing else could do." Is not the author's contention, however, as to the great loss the Addisonian essay suffers when isolated from its context a severe criticism on that essay as literature? The man of letters likes to read from a complete *Spectator* as he does from a complete Wordsworth. At the same time, the best of Addison, as of Wordsworth, can stand on its own feet in an anthology, and this is the final proof of its literary excellence. The taste for eighteenth-century

advertisements is, after all, only literary antiquarianism—a delightful indulgence, a by-path, but hardly necessary to the enjoyment of Addison's genius.

But it is neither Pope nor Addison who is ultimately Mr. Saintsbury's idol among the poets and prose-writers of the eighteenth-century. His idol of idols is Swift, and next to him he seems most wholeheartedly to love and admire Dr. Johnson and Fielding. He makes no bones about confessing his preference of Swift to Aristophanes and Rabelais and Molière. Swift does not at once fascinate and cold-shoulder him as he does so many people. Mr. Saintsbury glorifies *Gulliver*, and wisely so, right down to the last word about the Houyhnhnms, and he demands for the *Journal to Stella* recognition as "the first great novel, being at the same time a marvellous and absolutely genuine autobiography." His ultimate burst of appreciation is a beautifully characteristic example of what has before been called Saintsburyese—not because of any obscurity in it, but because of its oddity of phrase and metaphor :

Swift never wearies, for, as Bossuet said of human passion generally, there is in this greatest master of one of its most terrible forms, *quelque chose d'infini*, and the refreshment which he offers varies unceasingly from the lightest froth of pure nonsense, through beverages middle and stronger to the most drastic restoratives—the very strychnine and capsicum of irony.

But what, above all, attracts Mr. Saintsbury in Swift, Fielding and Johnson is their eminent manliness. He is an enthusiast within limits for the genius of Sterne and the genius of Horace Walpole. But he loves them in a grudging way. He is disgusted with their lack of muscle. He admits of the characters in *Tristram Shandy* that "they are . . . much more intrinsically true to life than many, if not almost all, the characters of Dickens," but he is too greatly shocked by Sterne's humour to be just to his work as a whole. It is the same with Walpole's letters. Mr. Saintsbury will heap sentence after sentence of praise upon them, till one would imagine they were his favourite eighteenth-century literature. He even defends Walpole's character against Macaulay, but in the result he damns him with faint praise quite as effectively as Macaulay did. That he has an enviable appetite for Walpole's letters is shown by the fact that, in speaking of Mrs. Toynbee's huge sixteen-volume edition of them, he observes that "even a single reading of it will supply the evening requirements of a man who does not go to bed very late, and has learnt the last lesson of intellectual as of other enjoyment—to enjoy *slowly*—for nearer a month than a week, and perhaps for longer still." The man who can get through Horace Walpole in a month of evenings

without sitting up late seems to me to be endowed not only with an avarice of reading, but with an avarice of Walpole. But, in spite of this, Mr. Saintsbury does not seem to like his author. His ideal author is one of whom he can say, as he does of Johnson, that he is "one of the greatest of Englishmen, one of the greatest men of letters, and one of the greatest of *men*." One of his complaints against Gray is that, though he liked *Joseph Andrews*, he "had apparently not enough manliness to see some of Fielding's real merits." As for Fielding, Mr. Saintsbury's verdict is summed up in Dryden's praise of Chaucer, "Here is God's plenty." In *Tom Jones* he contends that Fielding "puts the whole plant of the pleasure-giver in motion, as no novel-writer—not even Cervantes—had ever done before." For myself, I doubt whether the exaltation of Fielding has not become too much a matter of orthodoxy in recent years. Compare him with Swift, and he is long-winded in his sentences. Compare him with Sterne, and his characters are mechanical. Compare him with Dickens, and he reaches none of the depths, either of laughter or of sadness. This is not to question the genius of Fielding's vivid and critical picture of eighteenth-century manners and morals. It is merely to put a drag on the wheel of Mr. Saintsbury's galloping enthusiasm.

But, however one may quarrel with it, *The Peace of the Augustans* is a book to read with delight—an eccentric book, an extravagant book, a grumpy book, but a book of rare and amazing enthusiasm for good literature. Mr. Saintsbury's constant jibes at the present age, as though no one had ever been unmanly enough to make a joke before Mr. Shaw, become amusing in the end like Dr. Johnson's rudenesses. And Mr. Saintsbury's one attempt to criticize contemporary fiction—where he speaks of *Sinister Street* in the same breath with *Waverley* and *Pride and Prejudice*—is both amusing and rather appalling. But, in spite of his attitude to his own times, one could not ask for more genial company on going on a pilgrimage among the Augustans. Mr. Saintsbury has in this book written the most irresistible advertisement of eighteenth-century literature that has been published for many years.

XVI.—LABOUR OF AUTHORSHIP

LITERATURE maintains an endless quarrel with idle sentences. Twenty years ago this would have seemed too obvious to bear saying. But in the meantime there has been a good deal of dipping of pens in chaos, and authors have found excuses for themselves in a theory of literature which is impatient of difficult writing. It would not matter if it were only the paunched and flat-footed authors who were proclaiming the importance of writing without style. Unhappily, many excellent writers as well have used their gift of style to publish the praise of stylelessness. Within the last few weeks I have seen it suggested by two different critics that the hasty writing which has left its mark on so much of the work of Scott and Balzac was a good thing and almost a necessity of genius. It is no longer taken for granted, as it was in the days of Stevenson, that the starry word is worth the pains of discovery. Stevenson, indeed, is commonly dismissed as a pretty-pretty writer, a word-taster without intellect or passion, a juggler

rather than an artist. Pater's bust also is mutilated by irreverent schoolboys : it is hinted that he may have done well enough for the days of Victoria, but that he will not do at all for the world of George. It is all part of the reaction against style which took place when everybody found out the æsthetes. It was, one may admit, an excellent thing to get rid of the æsthetes, but it was by no means an excellent thing to get rid of the virtue which they tried to bring into English art and literature. The æsthetes were wrong in almost everything they said about art and literature, but they were right in impressing upon the children of men the duty of good drawing and good words. With the condemnation of Oscar Wilde, however, good words became suspected of kinship with evil deeds. Style was looked on as the sign of minor poets and major vices. Possibly, on the other hand, the reaction against style had nothing to do with the Wilde condemnation. The heresy of stylelessness is considerably older than that. Perhaps it is not quite fair to call it the heresy of stylelessness : it would be more accurate to describe it as the heresy of style without pains. It springs from the idea that great literature is all a matter of first fine careless raptures, and it is supported by the fact that apparently much of the greatest literature is so. If lines like

Hark, hark ! the lark at Heaven's gate sings,

OR

When daffodils begin to peer,

OR

His golden locks time hath to silver turned,

shape themselves in the poet's first thoughts, he would be a manifest fool to trouble himself further. Genius is the recognition of the perfect line, the perfect phrase, the perfect word, when it appears, and this perfect line or phrase or word is quite as likely to appear in the twinkling of an eye as after a week of vigils. But the point is that it does not invariably so appear. It sometimes cost Flaubert three days' labour to write one perfect sentence. Greater writers have written more hurriedly. But this does not justify lesser writers in writing hurriedly too.

Of all the authors who have exalted the part played in literature by inspiration as compared with labour, none has written more nobly or with better warrant than Shelley. "The mind," he wrote in the *Defence of Poetry*—

the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness ; the power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence

be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day, whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study.

He then goes on to interpret literally Milton's reference to *Paradise Lost* as an "unpremeditated song" "dictated" by the Muse, and to reply scornfully to those "who would allege the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the *Orlando Furioso*." Who is there who would not agree with Shelley quickly if it were a question of having to choose between his inspirational theory of literature and the mechanical theory of the arts advocated by such writers as Sir Joshua Reynolds? Literature without inspiration is obviously even a meaner thing than literature without style. But the notion that any man can become an artist by taking pains is merely an exaggerated protest against the notion that a man can become an artist without taking pains. Anthony Trollope, who settled down industriously to his day's task of literature as to bookkeeping, did not grow into an artist in any large sense; and Zola, with the motto "*Nulla dies sine linea*" ever facing him on his desk, made

himself a prodigious author, indeed, but never more than a second-rate writer. On the other hand, Trollope without industry would have been nobody at all, and Zola without pains might as well have been a waiter. Nor is it only the little or the clumsy artists who have found inspiration in labour. It is a pity we have not first drafts of all the great poems in the world : we might then see how much of the magic of literature is the result of toil and how much of the unpropheied wind of inspiration. Sir Sidney Colvin recently published an early draft of Keats's sonnet, "Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art," which showed that in the case of Keats at least the mind in creation was not "as a fading coal," but as a coal blown to increasing flame and splendour by sheer "labour and study." And the poetry of Keats is full of examples of the inspiration not of first but of second and later thoughts. Henry Stephens, a medical student who lived with him for some time, declared that an early draft of *Endymion* opened with the line :

A thing of beauty is a constant joy

—a line which, Stephens observed on hearing it, was "a fine line, but wanting something." Keats thought over it for a little, then cried out, "I have it," and wrote in its place :

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.

Nor is this an exceptional example of the studied miracles of Keats. The most famous and, worn and cheapened by quotation though it is, the most beautiful of all his phrases—

magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn—

did not reach its perfect shape without hesitation and pondering. He originally wrote "the wide casements" and "keelless seas":

the wide casements, opening on the foam
Of keelless seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

That would probably have seemed beautiful if the perfect version had not spoiled it for us. But does not the final version go to prove that Shelley's assertion that "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline" is far from being true for all poets? On the contrary, it is often the heat of labour which produces the heat of inspiration. Or rather it is often the heat of labour which enables the writer to recall the heat of inspiration. Ben Jonson, who held justly that "the poet must be able by nature and instinct to pour out the treasure of his mind," took care to add the warning that no one must think he "can leap forth suddenly a poet by dreaming he hath been in Parnassus." Poe has uttered a comparable warning against an excessive belief in the theory of the

natural inspiration of poets in his *Marginalia*, where he declares that "this untenable and paradoxical idea of the incompatibility of genius and art" must be "kick[ed] out of the world's way." Wordsworth's saying that poetry has its origin in "emotion recollected in tranquillity" also suggests that the inspiration of poetry is an inspiration that may be recaptured by contemplation and labour. How eagerly one would study a Shakespeare manuscript, were it unearthed, in which one could see the shaping imagination of the poet at work upon his lines! Many people have the theory—it is supported by an assertion of Jonson's—that Shakespeare wrote with a current pen, heedless of blots and small changes. He was, it is evident, not one of the correct authors. But it seems unlikely that no pains of rewriting went to the making of the speeches in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Hamlet's address to the skull. Shakespeare, one feels, is richer than any other author in the beauty of first thoughts. But one seems to perceive in much of his work the beauty of second thoughts too. There have been few great writers who have been so incapable of revision as Robert Browning, but Browning with all his genius is not a great stylist to be named with Shakespeare. He did indeed prove himself to be a great stylist in more than one

poem, such as *Childe Roland*—which he wrote almost at a sitting. His inspiration, however, seldom raised his work to the same beauty of perfection. He is, in point of mere style, the most imperfect of the great poets. If only Tennyson had had his genius! If only Browning had had Tennyson's desire for golden words!

It would be absurd, however, to suggest that the main labour of an author consists in rewriting. The choice of words may have been made before a single one of them has been written down, as tradition tells us was the case with Menander, who described one of his plays as "finished" before he had written a word of it. It would be foolish, too, to write as though perfection of form in literature were merely a matter of picking and choosing among decorative words. Style is a method, not of decoration, but of expression. It is an attempt to make the beauty and energy of the imagination articulate. It is not any more than is construction the essence of the greatest art: it is, however, a prerequisite of the greatest art. Even those writers whom we regard as the least decorative labour and sorrow after it as eagerly as the æsthetes. We who do not know Russian do not usually think of Tolstoy as a stylist, but he took far more trouble with his writing than did Oscar Wilde (whose chief fault is, indeed, that in spite

of his theories his style is not laboured and artistic but inspirational and indolent). Count Ilya Tolstoy, the son of the novelist, recently published a volume of reminiscences of his father, in which he gave some interesting particulars of Tolstoy's energetic struggle for perfection in writing :

When *Anna Karénina* began to come out in the *Russki Vyéstnik* [he wrote], long galley-proofs were posted to my father, and he looked them through and corrected them. At first, the margins would be marked with the ordinary typographical signs, letters omitted, marks of punctuation, and so on ; then individual words would be changed, and then whole sentences ; erasures and additions would begin, till in the end the proof-sheet would be reduced to a mass of patches, quite black in places, and it was quite impossible to send it back as it stood because no one but my mother could make head or tail of the tangle of conventional signs, transpositions, and erasures.

My mother would sit up all night copying the whole thing out afresh.

In the morning there lay the pages on her table, neatly piled together, covered all over with her fine, clear handwriting, and everything ready, so that when "Lyóvotchka" came down he could send the proof-sheets out by post.

My father would carry them off to his study to have "just one last look," and by the evening it was worse than before ; the whole thing had been rewritten and messed up once more.

"Sonya, my dear, I am very sorry, but I've spoilt all your work again ; I promise I won't do it any more," he would say, showing her the passages with a guilty air. "We'll send them off to-morrow without fail." But his to-morrow was put off day by day for weeks or months together.

"There's just one bit I want to look through again," my

father would say ; but he would get carried away and rewrite the whole thing afresh. There were even occasions when, after posting the proofs, my father would remember some particular words next day and correct them by telegraph.

There, better than in a thousand generalizations, you see what the artistic conscience is. In a world in which authors, like solicitors, must live, it is, of course, seldom possible to take pains in this measure. Dostoevsky used to groan that his poverty left him no time or chance to write his best as Tolstoy and Turgenev could write theirs. But he at least laboured all that he could. Novel-writing has since his time become as painless as dentistry, and the result may be seen in a host of books that, while affecting to be literature, have no price except as merchandise.

XVII.—BOOK-REVIEWING

I NOTICE that in Mr. Secker's *Art and Craft of Letters* series no volume on book-reviewing has yet been announced. A volume on criticism has been published, it is true, but book-reviewing is something different from criticism. It swings somewhere between criticism on the one hand and reporting on the other. When Mr. Arthur Bouchier a few years ago, in the course of a dispute about Mr. Walkley's criticisms, spoke of the dramatic critic as a dramatic reporter, he did a very insolent thing. But there was a certain reasonableness in his phrase. The critic on the Press is a news-gatherer as surely as the man who is sent to describe a public meeting or a strike. Whether he is asked to write a report on a play of Mr. Shaw's or an exhibition of etchings by Mr. Bone or a volume of short stories by Mr. Conrad or a speech by Mr. Asquith or a strike on the Clyde, his function is the same. It is primarily to give an account, a description, of what he has seen or heard or read. This may seem to many people—especially to critics—a degrading

conception of a book-reviewer's work. But it is quite the contrary. A great deal of book-reviewing at the present time is dead matter. Book-reviews ought at least to be alive as news.

At present everybody is ready to write book-reviews. This is because nearly everybody believes that they are the easiest kind of thing to write. People who would shrink from offering to write poems or leading articles or descriptive sketches of football matches, have an idea that reviewing books is something with the capacity for which every man is born, as he is born with the capacity for talking prose. They think it is as easy as having opinions. It is simply making a few remarks at the end of a couple of hours spent with a book in an armchair. Many men and women—novelists, barristers, professors and others—review books in their spare time, as they look on this as work they can do when their brains are too tired to do anything which is of genuine importance. A great deal of book-reviewing is done contemptuously, as though to review books well were not as difficult as to do anything else well. This is perhaps due in some measure to the fact that, for the amount of hard work it involves, book-reviewing is one of the worst-paid branches of journalism. The hero of Mr. Beresford's new novel, *The Invisible Event*, makes an income

of £250 a year as an outside reviewer, and it is by no means every outside reviewer who makes as much as that from reviewing alone. It is not that there is not an immense public which reads book-reviews. Mr. T. P. O'Connor showed an admirable journalistic instinct when twenty years or so ago he filled the front page of the *Weekly Sun* with a long book-review. The sale of the *Times Literary Supplement*, since it became a separate publication, is evidence that, for good or bad, many thousands of readers have acquired the habit of reading criticism of current literature.

But I do not think that the mediocre quality of most book-reviewing is due to low payment. It is a result, I believe, of a wrong conception of what a book-review should be. My own opinion is that a review should be, from one point of view, a portrait of a book. It should present the book instead of merely presenting remarks about the book. In reviewing, portraiture is more important than opinion. One has to get the reflexion of the book, and not a mere comment on it, down on paper. Obviously, one must not press this theory of portraiture too far. It is useful chiefly as a protest against the curse of comment. Many clever writers, when they come to write book-reviews, instead of portraying the book, waste their time in remarks to

But Anatole France happens to be a man of genius, and genius is a justification of any method. In the hands of a pinchbeck Anatole France, how unendurable the review conceived as a *causerie* would become! Anatole France observes that "all books in general, and even the most admirable, seem to me infinitely less precious for what they contain than for what he who reads puts into them." That, in a sense, is true. But no reviewer ought to believe it. His duty is to his author: whatever he "puts into" him is a subsidiary matter. "The critic," says Anatole France again, "must imbue himself thoroughly with the idea that every book has as many different aspects as it has readers, and that a poem, like a landscape, is transformed in all the eyes that see it, in all the souls that conceive it." Here he gets nearer the idea of criticism as portraiture, and almost every critic of importance has been a portrait-painter. In this respect Sainte-Beuve is at one with Macaulay, Pater with Matthew Arnold, Anatole France (occasionally) with Henry James. They may portray authors rather than books, artists rather than their works, but this only means that criticism at its highest is a study of the mind of the artist as reflected in his art.

Clearly, if the reviewer can paint the portrait of

an author, he is achieving something better even than the portrait of a book. But what, at all costs, he must avoid doing is to substitute for a portrait of one kind or another the rag-bag of his own moral, political or religious opinions. It is one of the most difficult things in the world for anyone who happens to hold strong opinions not to make the mind of Shakespeare himself a pulpit from which to roar them at the world. Reviewers with theories about morality and religion can seldom be induced to come to the point of portraiture until they have enjoyed a preliminary half-column of self-explanation. In their eyes a review is a moral essay rather than an imaginative interpretation. In dissenting from this view, one is not pleading for a race of reviewers without moral or religious ideas, or even prepossessions. One is merely urging that in a review, as in a novel or a play, the moral should be seated at the heart instead of sprawling all over the surface. In the well-worn phrase, it should be implicit, not explicit. Undoubtedly a rare critic of genius can make an interesting review-article out of a statement of his moral and political ideas. But that only justifies the article as an essay, not as a review. To many reviewers—especially in the bright days of youth—it seems an immensely more important thing to write a good essay than a good

review. And so it is, but not when a review is wanted. It is a far, far better thing to write a good essay about America than a good review of a book about America. But the one should not be substituted for the other. If one takes up a review of a book on America by Mr. Wells or Mr. Bennett, it is in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred in order to find out what the author thinks, not what the reviewer thinks. If the reviewer begins with a paragraph of general remarks about America—or, worse still, about some abstract thing like liberty—he is almost invariably wasting paper. I believe it is a sound rule to destroy all preliminary paragraphs of this kind. They are detestable in almost all writing, but most detestable of all in book-reviews, where it is important to plunge all at once into the middle of things. I say this, though there is an occasional book-reviewer whose preliminary paragraphs I would not miss for worlds. But one has even known book-reviewers who wrote delightful articles, though they made scarcely any reference to the books under review at all.

To my mind, nothing more clearly shows the general misconception of the purpose of a book-review than the attitude of the majority of journalists to the quotational review. It is the custom to despise the quotational review—to dismiss it as

mere "gutting." As a consequence, it is generally very badly done. It is done as if under the impression that it does not matter what quotations one gives so long as one fills the space. One great paper lends support to this contemptuous attitude towards quotational criticism by refusing to pay its contributors for space taken up by quotations. A London evening newspaper was once guilty of the same folly. A reviewer on the staff of the latter confessed to me that to the present day he finds it impossible, without an effort, to make quotations in a review, because of the memory of those days when to quote was to add to one's poverty. Despised work is seldom done well, and it is not surprising that it is almost more seldom that one finds a quotational review well done than any other sort. Yet how critically illuminating a quotation may be ! There are many books in regard to which quotation is the only criticism necessary. Books of memoirs and books of verse—the least artistic as well as the most artistic forms of literature—both lend themselves to it. To criticise verse without giving quotations is to leave one largely in ignorance of the quality of the verse. The selection of passages to quote is at least as fine a test of artistic judgment as any comment the critic can make. In regard to books of memoirs, gossip, and so forth, one does not

ask for a test of delicate artistic judgment. Books of this kind should simply be rummaged for entertaining "news." To review them well is to make an anthology of (in a wide sense) amusing passages. There is no other way to portray them. And yet I have known a very brilliant reviewer take a book of gossip about the German Court and, instead of quoting any of the numerous things that would interest people, fill half a column with abuse of the way in which the book was written, of the inconsequence of the chapters, of the second-handness of many of the anecdotes. Now, I do not object to any of these charges being brought. It is well that "made" books should not be palmed off on the public as literature. On the other hand, a mediocre book (from the point of view of literature or history) is no excuse for a mediocre review. No matter how mediocre a book is, if it is on a subject of great interest, it usually contains enough vital matter to make an exciting half-column. Many reviewers despise a bad book so heartily that, instead of squeezing every drop of interest out of it, as they ought to do, they refrain from squeezing a single drop of interest out of it. They are frequently people who suffer from anecdotophobia. "Scorn not the anecdote" is a motto that might be modestly engraved on the heart of every reviewer.

After all, Montaigne did not scorn it, and there is no reason why the modern journalist should be ashamed of following so respectable an example. One can quite easily understand how the gluttony of many publishers for anecdotes has driven writers with a respect for their intellect into revolt. But let us not be unjust to the anecdote because it has been cheapened through no fault of its own. We may be sure of one thing. A review—a review, at any rate, of a book of memoirs or any similar kind of non-literary book—which contains an anecdote is better than a review which does not contain an anecdote. If an anecdotal review is bad, it is because it is badly done, not because it is anecdotal. This, one might imagine, is too obvious to require saying; but many men of brains go through life without ever being able to see it.

One of the chief virtues of the anecdote is that it brings the reviewer down from his generalizations to individual instances. Generalizations mixed with instances make a fine sort of review, but to flow on for a column of generalizations without ever pausing to light them into life with instances, concrete examples, anecdotes, is to write not a book-review but a sermon. Of the two, the sermon is much the easier to write: it does not involve the trouble of constant reference to one's authorities.

Perhaps, however, someone with practice in writing sermons will argue that the sermon without instances is as somniferous as the book-review with the same want. Whether that is so or not, the book-review is not, as a rule, a place for abstract argument. Not that one wants to shut out controversy. There is no pleasanter review to read than a controversial review. Even here, however, one demands portrait as well as argument. It is, in nine cases out of ten, waste of time to assail a theory when you can portray a man. It always seems to me to be hopelessly wrong for the reviewer of biographies, critical studies, or books of a similar kind, to allow his mind to wander from the main figure in the book to the discussion of some theory or other that has been incidentally put forward. Thus, in a review of a book on Stevenson, the important thing is to reconstruct the figure of Stevenson, the man and the artist. This is much more vitally interesting and relevant than theorizing on such questions as whether the writing of prose or of poetry is the more difficult art, or what are the essential characteristics of romance. These and many other questions may arise, and it is the proper task of the reviewer to discuss them, so long as their discussion is kept subordinate to the portraiture of the central figure. But they must not be allowed

to push the leading character in the whole business right out of the review. If they are brought in at all, they must be brought in, like moral sentiments, inoffensively by the way.

In pleading that a review should be a portrait of a book to a vastly greater degree than it is a direct comment on a book, I am not pleading that it should be a mere bald summary. The summary kind of review is no more a portrait than is the Scotland Yard description of a man wanted by the police. Portraiture implies selection and a new emphasis. The synopsis of the plot of a novel is as far from being a good review as is a paragraph of general comment on it. The review must justify itself, not as a reflection of dead bones, but by a new life of its own.

Further, I am not pleading for the suppression of comment and, if need be, condemnation. But either to praise or condemn without instances is dull. Neither the one nor the other is the chief thing in the review. They are the crown of the review, but not its life. There are many critics to whom condemnation of books they do not like seems the chief end of man. They regard themselves as engaged upon a holy war against the Devil and his works. Horace complained that it was only poets who were not allowed to be mediocre. The modern

critic—I should say the modern critic of the censorious kind, not the critic who looks on it as his duty to puff out meaningless superlatives over every book that appears—will not allow any author to be mediocre. The war against mediocrity is a necessary war, but I cannot help thinking that mediocrity is more likely to yield to humour than to contemptuous abuse. Apart from this, it is the reviewer's part to maintain high standards for work that aims at being literature, rather than to career about, like a destroying angel, among books that have no such aim. Criticism, Anatole France has said, is the record of the soul's adventures among masterpieces. Reviewing, alas! is for the most part the record of the critic's adventures among books that are the reverse of masterpieces. What, then, are his standards to be? Well, a man must judge linen as linen, cotton as cotton, and shoddy as shoddy. It is ridiculous to denounce any of them for not being silk. To do so is not to apply high standards so much as to apply wrong standards. One has no right as a reviewer to judge a book by any standard save that which the author aims at reaching. As a private reader, one has the right to say of a novel by Mr. Joseph Hocking, for instance: "This is not literature. This is not realism. This does not interest me. This is awful." I do not say

that these sentences can be fairly used of any of Mr. Hocking's novels. I merely take him as an example of a popular novelist who would be bound to be condemned if judged by comparison with Flaubert or Meredith or Mr. Galsworthy. But the reviewer is not asked to state whether he finds Mr. Hocking readable so much as to state the kind of readableness at which Mr. Hocking aims and the measure of his success in achieving it. It is the reviewer's business to discover the quality of a book rather than to keep announcing that the quality does not appeal to him. Not that he need conceal the fact that it has failed to appeal to him, but he should remember that this is a comparatively irrelevant matter. He may make it as clear as day—indeed, he ought to make it as clear as day, if it is his opinion—that he regards the novels of Charles Garvice as shoddy, but he ought also to make it clear whether they are the kind of shoddy that serves its purpose.

Is this to lower literary standards? I do not think so, for, in cases of this kind, one is not judging literature, but popular books. Those to whom popular books are anathema have a temperament which will always find it difficult to fall in with the limitations of the work of a general reviewer. The curious thing is that this intolerance of easy

writing is most generally found among those who are most opposed to intolerance in the sphere of morals. It is as though they had escaped from one sort of Puritanism into another. Personally, I do not see why, if we should be tolerant of the breach of a moral commandment, we should not be equally tolerant of the breach of a literary commandment. We should gently scan, not only our brother man, but our brother author. The æsthete of to-day, however, will look kindly on adultery, but show all the harshness of a Pilgrim Father in his condemnation of a split infinitive. I cannot see the logic of this. If irregular and commonplace people have the right to exist, surely irregular and commonplace books have a right to exist by their side.

The reviewer, however, is often led into a false attitude to a book, not by its bad quality, but by some irrelevant quality—some underlying moral or political idea. He denounces a novel the moral ideas of which offend him, without giving sufficient consideration to the success or failure of the novelist in the effort to make his characters live. Similarly, he praises a novel with the moral ideas of which he agrees, without reflecting that perhaps it is as a tract rather than as a work of art that it has given him pleasure. Both the praise and blame which have been heaped upon Mr. Kipling are

largely due to appreciation or dislike of his politics. The Imperialist finds his heart beating faster as he reads *The English Flag*, and he praises Mr. Kipling as an artist when it is really Mr. Kipling as a propagandist who has moved him. The anti-Imperialist, on the other hand, is often led by detestation of Mr. Kipling's politics to deny even the palpable fact that Mr. Kipling is a very brilliant short-story teller. It is for the reviewer to raise himself above such prejudices and to discover what are Mr. Kipling's ideas apart from his art, and what is his art apart from his ideas.

The relation between one and the other is also clearly a relevant matter for discussion. But the confusion of one with the other is fatal. In the field of morals we are perhaps led astray in our judgments even more frequently than in matters of politics. Mr. Shaw's plays are often denounced by critics whom they have made laugh till their sides ached, and the reason is that, after leaving the theatre, the critics remember that they do not like Mr. Shaw's moral ideas. In the same way, it seems to me, a great deal of the praise that has been given to Mr. D. H. Lawrence as an artist ought really to be given to him as a distributor of certain moral ideas. That he has studied wonderfully one aspect of human nature, that he can describe wonderfully

some aspects of external nature, I know ; but I doubt whether his art is fine enough or sympathetic enough to make enthusiastic anyone who differs from the moral attitude, as it may be called, of his stories. This is the real test of a work of art—has it sufficient imaginative vitality to capture the imagination of artistic readers who are not in sympathy with its point of view ? The *Book of Job* survives the test : it is a book to the spell of which no imaginative man could be indifferent, whether Christian, Jew or atheist. Similarly, Shelley is read and written about with enthusiasm by many who hold moral, religious and political ideas directly contrary to his own. Mr. Kipling's *Recessional*, with its sombre imaginative glow, its recapturing of Old Testament prides and fears, commands the praise of thousands to whom much of the rest of his poetry is the abominable thing. It is the reviewer's task to discover imagination even in those who are the enemies of the ideas he cherishes. In so far as he cannot do this, he fails in his business as a critic of the arts.

It may be said in answer to all this, however, that to appeal for tolerance in book-reviewers is not necessary. The Press is already overcrowded with laudations of commonplace books. Not a day passes but at least a dozen books are praised as

having "not a dull moment," being "readable from cover to cover," and as reminding the reviewer of Stevenson, Meredith, Oscar Wilde, Paul de Kock, and Jane Austen. That is not the kind of tolerance which one is eager to see. That kind of review is scarcely different from a publisher's advertisement. Besides, it usually sins in being mere summary and comment, or even comment without summary. It is a thoughtless scattering of acceptable words and is as unlike the review conceived as a portrait as is the hostile kind of commentary review which I have been discussing. It is generally the comment of a lazy brain, instead of being, like the other, the comment of a clever brain. Praise is the vice of the commonplace reviewer, just as censoriousness is the vice of the more clever sort. Not that one wishes either praise or censure to be stinted. One is merely anxious not to see them misapplied. It is a vice, not a virtue, of reviewing to be lukewarm either in the one or the other. What one desires most of all in a reviewer, after a capacity to portray books, is the courage of his opinions, so that, whether he is face to face with an old reputation like Mr. Conrad's or a new reputation like Mr. Mackenzie's, he will boldly express his enthusiasms and his dissatisfactions without regard to the estimate of the author, which is, for the

moment, "in the air." What seems to be wanted, then, in a book-reviewer is that, without being servile, he should be swift to praise, and that, without being censorious, he should have the courage to blame. While tolerant of kinds in literature, he should be intolerant of pretentiousness. He should be less patient, for instance, of a pseudo-Milton than of a writer who frankly aimed at nothing higher than a book of music-hall songs. He should be more eager to define the qualities of a book than to heap comment upon comment. If—I hope the image is not too strained—he draws a book from the life, he will produce a better review than if he spends his time calling it names, whether foul or fair.

But what of the equipment of the reviewer? it may be asked. What of his standards? One of the faults of modern reviewing seems to me to be that the standards of many critics are derived almost entirely from the literature of the last thirty years. This is especially so with some American critics, who rush feverishly into print with volumes spotted with the names of modern writers as Christmas pudding is spotted with currants. To read them is to get the impression that the world is only a hundred years old. It seems to me that Matthew Arnold was right when he urged men to turn to the classics for their standards. His

definition of the classics may have been too narrow, and nothing could be more utterly dead than a criticism which tries to measure imaginative literature by an academic standard or the rules of Aristotle. But it is only those to whom the classics are themselves dead who are likely to lay this academic dead hand on new literature. Besides, even the most academic standards are valuable in a world in which chaos is hailed with enthusiasm both in art and in politics. But, when all is said, the taste which is the essential quality of a critic is something with which he is born. It is something which is not born of reading Sophocles and Plato and does not perish of reading Miss Marie Corelli. This taste must illuminate all the reviewer's portraits. Without it, he had far better be a coach-builder than a reviewer of books. It is this taste in the background that gives distinction to a tolerant and humorous review of even the most unambitious detective story.

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VI.—WILLIAM COWPER

COWPER has the charm of littleness. His life and genius were on the miniature scale, though his tragedy was a burden for Atlas. He left several pictures of himself in his letters, all of which make one see him as a veritable Tom Thumb among Christians. He wrote, he tells us, at Olney, in "a summerhouse not much bigger than a sedan-chair." At an earlier date, when he was living at Huntingdon, he compared himself to "a Thames wherry in a world full of tempest and commotion," and congratulated himself on "the creek I have put into and the snugness it affords me." His very clothes suggested that he was the inhabitant of a plaything world. "Green and buff," he declared, "are colours in which I am oftener seen than in any others, and are become almost as natural to me as a parrot." "My thoughts," he informed the Rev. John Newton, "are clad in a sober livery, for the most part as grave as that of a bishop's servants"; but his body was dressed in parrot's colours, and his bald head was in a bag or a white cap. If he

requested one of his friends to send him anything from town, it was usually some little thing, such as a "genteelish toothpick case," a handsome stock-buckle, a new hat—"not a round slouch, which I abhor, but a smart well-cocked fashionable affair"—or a cuckoo-clock. He seems to have shared Wordsworth's taste for the last of these. Are we not told that Wordsworth died as his favourite cuckoo-clock was striking noon? Cowper may almost be said, so far as his tastes and travels are concerned, to have lived in a cage. He never ventured outside England, and even of England he knew only a few of the southern counties. "I have lived much at Southampton," he boasted at the age of sixty, "have slept and caught a sore throat at Lyndhurst, and have swum in the Bay of Weymouth." That was his grand tour. He made a journey to Eastham, near Chichester, about the time of this boast, and confessed that, as he drove with Mrs. Unwin over the downs by moonlight, "I indeed myself was a little daunted by the tremendous height of the Sussex hills in comparison of which all I had seen elsewhere are dwarfs." He went on a visit to some relations on the coast of Norfolk a few years later, and, writing to Lady Hesketh, lamented: "I shall never see Weston more. I have been tossed like a ball into a far

country, from which there is no rebound for me." Who but the little recluse of a little world could think of Norfolk as a far country and shake with alarm before the "tremendous height" of the Sussex downs?

"We are strange creatures, my little friend," Cowper once wrote to Christopher Rowley; "everything that we do is in reality important, though half that we do seems to be push-pin." Here we see one of the main reasons of Cowper's eternal attractiveness. He played at push-pin during most of his life, but he did so in full consciousness of the background of doom. He trifled because he knew, if he did not trifle, he would go mad with thinking about Heaven and Hell. He sought in the infinitesimal a cure for the disease of brooding on the infinite. His distractions were those not of too light, but of too grave, a mind. If he picnicked with the ladies, it was in order to divert his thoughts from the wrath to come. He was gay, but on the edge of a precipice.

I do not mean to suggest that he had no natural inclination to trifling. Even in the days when he was studying law in the Temple he dined every Thursday with six of his old school-fellows at the Nonsense Club. His essays in Bonnell Thornton and Coleman's paper, *The Connoisseur*, written some

time before he went mad and tried to hang himself in a garter, lead one to believe that, if it had not been for his breakdown, he might have equalled or surpassed Addison as a master of light prose. He was something of the traditional idle apprentice, indeed, during his first years in a solicitor's office, as we gather from the letter in which he reminds Lady Hesketh how he and Thurlow used to pass the time with her and her sister, Theodora, the object of his fruitless love. "There was I, and the future Lord Chancellor," he wrote, "constantly employed from morning to night in giggling and making giggle, instead of studying the law." Such was his life till the first attack of madness came at the age of thirty-two. He had already, it is true, on one occasion, felt an ominous shock as a schoolboy at Westminster, when a skull thrown up by a gravedigger at St. Margaret's rolled towards him and struck him on the leg. Again, in his chambers in the Middle Temple, he suffered for a time from religious melancholy, which he did his best to combat with the aid of the poems of George Herbert. Even at the age of twenty-three he told Robert Lloyd in a rhymed epistle that he "addressed the muse," not in order to show his genius or his wit,

But to divert a fierce banditti
(Sworn foe to everything that's witty)
That, in a black infernal train,
Make cruel inroads in my brain,
And daily threaten to drive thence
My little garrison of sense.

It was not till after his release from the St. Albans madhouse in his thirties, however, that he began to build a little new world of pleasures on the ruins of the old. He now set himself of necessity to the task of creating a refuge within sight of the Cross, where he could live, in his brighter moments, a sort of Epicurean of evangelical piety. He was a damned soul that must occupy itself at all costs and not damn itself still deeper in the process. His round of recreation, it must be admitted, was for the most part such as would make the average modern pleasure-seeker quail more than any inferno of miseries. Only a nature of peculiar sweetness could charm us from the atmosphere of endless sermons and hymns in which Cowper learned to be happy in the Unwins' Huntingdon home. Breakfast, he tells us, was between eight and nine. Then, "till eleven, we read either the Scripture, or the sermons of some faithful preacher of those holy mysteries." Church was at eleven. After that he was at liberty to read, walk, ride, or work in the garden till the three o'clock dinner. Then to the

garden, "where with Mrs. Unwin and her son I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time." After tea came a four-mile walk, and "at night we read and converse, as before, till supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or a sermon; and last of all the family are called to prayers." In those days, it may be, evangelical religion had some of the attractions of a new discovery. Theories of religion were probably as exciting a theme of discussion in the age of Wesley as theories of art and literature in the age of cubism and *vers libre*. One has to remember this in order to be able to realize that, as Cowper said, "such a life as this is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness." He unquestionably found it so, and, when the Rev. Morley Unwin was killed as the result of a fall from his horse, Cowper and Mrs. Unwin moved to Olney in order to enjoy further evangelical companionship in the neighbourhood of the Rev. John Newton, the converted slave-trader, who was curate in that town. At Olney Cowper added at once to his terrors of Hell and to his amusements. For the terrors, Newton, who seems to have wielded the Gospel as fiercely as a slaver's whip, was largely responsible. He had earned a reputation for "preaching people mad," and Cowper, tortured with shyness, was

even subjected to the ordeal of leading in prayer at gatherings of the faithful. Newton, however, was a man of tenderness, humour, and literary tastes, as well as of a somewhat savage piety. He was not only Cowper's tyrant, but Cowper's nurse, and, in setting Cowper to write the Olney Hymns, he gave a powerful impulse to a talent hitherto all but hidden. At the same time, when, as a result of the too merciless flagellation of his parishioners on the occasion of some Fifth of November revels, Newton was attacked by a mob and driven out of Olney, Cowper undoubtedly began to breathe more freely. Even under the eye of Newton, however, Cowper could enjoy his small pleasures, and we have an attractive picture of him feeding his eight pair of tame pigeons every morning on the gravel walk in the garden. He shared with Newton his amusements as well as his miseries. We find him in 1780 writing to the departed Newton to tell him of his recreations as an artist and gardener. "I draw," he said, "mountains, valleys, woods, and streams, and ducks, and dab-chicks." He represents himself in this lively letter as a Christian lover of baubles, rather to the disadvantage of lovers of baubles who are not Christians :

I delight in baubles, and know them to be so ; for rested in, and viewed without a reference to their author, what is

the earth—what are the planets—what is the sun itself but a bauble ? Better for a man never to have seen them, or to see them with the eyes of a brute, stupid and unconscious of what he beholds, than not to be able to say, “The Maker of all these wonders is my friend !” Their eyes have never been opened to see that they are trifles ; mine have been, and will be till they are closed for ever. They think a fine estate, a large conservatory, a hothouse rich as a West Indian garden, things of consequence ; visit them with pleasure, and muse upon them with ten times more. I am pleased with a frame of four lights, doubtful whether the few pines it contains will ever be worth a farthing ; amuse myself with a greenhouse which Lord Bute’s gardener could take upon his back, and walk away with ; and when I have paid it the accustomed visit, and watered it, and given it air, I say to myself : “This is not mine, it is a plaything lent me for the present ; I must leave it soon.”

In this and the following year we find him turning his thoughts more and more frequently to writing as a means of forgetting himself. “The necessity of amusement,” he wrote to Mrs. Unwin’s clergyman son, “makes me sometimes write verses ; it made me a carpenter, a birdcage maker, a gardener ; and has lately taught me to draw, and to draw too with . . . surprising proficiency in the art, considering my total ignorance of it two months ago.” His impulse towards writing verses, however, was an impulse of a playful fancy rather than of a burning imagination. “I have no more right to the name of poet,” he once said, “than a maker of mouse-traps has to that of an engineer. . . . Such

a talent in verse as mine is like a child's rattle—very entertaining to the trifler that uses it, and very disagreeable to all beside.” “Alas,” he wrote in another letter, “what can I do with my wit? I have not enough to do great things with, and these little things are so fugitive that, while a man catches at the subject, he is only filling his hand with smoke. I must do with it as I do with my linnet; I keep him for the most part in a cage, but now and then set open the door, that he may whisk about the room a little, and then shut him up again.” It may be doubted whether, if subjects had not been imposed on him from without, he would have written much save in the vein of “dear Mat Prior's easy jingle” or the Latin trifles of Vincent Bourne, of whom he said: “He can speak of a magpie or a cat in terms so exquisitely appropriated to the character he draws that one would suppose him animated by the spirit of the creature he describes.”

Cowper was not to be allowed to write, except occasionally, on magpies and cats. Mrs. Unwin, who took a serious view of the poet's art, gave him as a subject *The Progress of Error*, which was responsible for the now little-known satires, with which he began at the age of fifty in 1782. It is

be read with unmixed, or even with much, delight. It seldom rises above a good man's rhetoric. Cowper, instead of writing about himself and his pets and his cucumber-frames, wrote of the wicked world from which he had retired, and the vices of which he could not attack with that particularity that makes satire interesting. The satires are not exactly dull, but they are lacking in force, either of wit or of passion. They are hardly more than an expression of sentiment and opinion. The sentiments are usually sound—for Cowper was an honest lover of liberty and goodness—but even the cause of liberty is not likely to gain much from such a couplet as :

Man made for kings ! those optics are but dim
That tell you so—say, rather, they for him.

Nor will the manners of the clergy benefit much as the result of such an attack on the “pleasant-Sunday-afternoon” kind of pastor as is contained in the lines :

If apostolic gravity be free
To play the fool on Sundays, why not we ?
If he the tinkling harpsichord regards
As inoffensive, what offence in cards ?

These, it must in fairness be said, are not examples of the best in the moral satires ; but the latter is worth quoting as evidence of the way in which

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Cowper tried to use verse as the pulpit of a rather narrow creed. The satires are hardly more than denominational in their interest. They belong to the religious fashion of their time, and are interesting to us now only as the old clothes of eighteenth-century evangelicalism. The subject-matter is secular as well as religious, but the atmosphere almost always remains evangelical. The Rev. John Newton wrote a Preface for the volume, suggesting this and claiming that the author "aims to communicate his own perceptions of the truth, beauty and influence of the religion of the Bible." The publisher became so alarmed at this advertisement of the piety of the book that he succeeded in suppressing it in the first edition. Cowper himself had enough worldly wisdom to wish to conceal his pious intentions from the first glance of the reader, and for this reason opened the book, not with *The Progress of Error*, but with the more attractively-named *Table Talk*. "My sole drift is to be useful," he told a relation, however. ". . . My readers will hardly have begun to laugh before they will be called upon to correct that levity, and peruse me with a more serious air." He informed Newton at the same time: "Thinking myself in a measure obliged to tickle, if I meant to please, I therefore affected a jocularity I did not feel." He also told

Newton : " I am merry that I may decoy people into my company." On the other hand, Cowper did not write *John Gilpin*, which is certainly his masterpiece, in the mood of a man using wit as a decoy. He wrote it because it irresistibly demanded to be written. " I wonder," he once wrote to Newton, " that a sportive thought should ever knock at the door of my intellects, and still more that it should gain admittance. It is as if harlequin should intrude himself into the gloomy chamber where a corpse is deposited in state." Harlequin, luckily for us, took hold of his pen in *John Gilpin* and in many of the letters. In the moral satires, harlequin is dressed in a sober suit and sent to a theological seminary. One cannot but feel that there is something incongruous in the boast of a wit and a poet that he had " found occasion towards the close of my last poem, called *Retirement*, to take some notice of the modern passion for seaside entertainments, and to direct the means by which they might be made useful as well as agreeable." This might serve well enough as a theme for a " letter to the editor " of the *Baptist Eye-opener*. One cannot, however, imagine its causing a flutter in the breast of even the meekest of the nine muses.

Cowper, to say truth, had the genius not of a poet

but of a letter-writer. The interest of his verse is chiefly historical. He was a poet of the transition to Wordsworth and the revolutionists, and was a mouthpiece of his time. But he has left only a tiny quantity of memorable verse. Lamb has often been quoted in his favour. "I have," he wrote to Coleridge in 1796, "been reading *The Task* with fresh delight. I am glad you love Cowper. I could forgive a man for not enjoying Milton, but I would not call that man my friend who should be offended with the 'divine chit-chat of Cowper.'" Lamb, it should be remembered, was a youth of twenty-one when he wrote this, and Cowper's verse had still the attractiveness of early blossoms that herald the coming of spring. There is little in *The Task* to make it worth reading to-day, except to the student of literary history. Like the Olney Hymns and the moral satires it was a poem written to order. Lady Austen, the vivacious widow who had meanwhile joined the Olney group, was anxious that Cowper should show what he could do in blank verse. He undertook to humour her if she would give him a subject. "Oh," she said, "you can never be in want of a subject; you can write upon any; write upon this sofa!" Cowper, in his more ambitious verse, seems seldom to have written under the compulsion of the subject as the great poets do. Even

the noble lines *On the Loss of the Royal George* were written, as he confessed, "by desire of Lady Austen, who wanted words to the March in *Scipio*." For this Lady Austen deserves the world's thanks, as she does for cheering him up in his low spirits with the story of John Gilpin. He did not write *John Gilpin* by request, however. He was so delighted on hearing the story that he lay awake half the night laughing at it, and the next day he felt compelled to sit down and write it out as a ballad. "Strange as it may seem," he afterwards said of it, "the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood, and but for that saddest mood, perhaps, had never been written at all." "The grinners at *John Gilpin*," he said in another letter, "little dream what the author sometimes suffers. How I hated myself yesterday for having ever wrote it!" It was the publication of *The Task* and *John Gilpin* that made Cowper famous. It is not *The Task* that keeps him famous to-day. There is, it seems to me, more of the divine fire in any half-dozen of his good letters than there is in the entire six books of *The Task*. One has only to read the argument at the top of the third book, called *The Garden*, in order to see in what a dreary didactic spirit it is written. Here is the argument in full :

Self-recollection and reproof—Address to domestic happiness—Some account of myself—The vanity of many of the pursuits which are accounted wise—Justification of my censures—Divine illumination necessary to the most expert philosopher—The question, what is truth? answered by other questions—Domestic happiness addressed again—Few lovers of the country—My tame hare—Occupations of a retired gentleman in the garden—Pruning—Framing—Greenhouse—Sowing of flower-seeds—The country preferable to the town even in the winter—Reasons why it is deserted at that season—Ruinous effects of gaming and of expensive improvement—Book concludes with an apostrophe to the metropolis.

It is true that, in the intervals of addresses to domestic happiness and apostrophes to the metropolis, there is plenty of room here for Virgilian verse if Cowper had had the genius for it. Unfortunately, when he writes about his garden, he too often writes about it as prosaically as a contributor to a gardening paper. His description of the making of a hot frame is merely a blank-verse paraphrase of the commonest prose. First, he tells us :

The stable yields a stercoraceous heap,
 Impregnated with quick fermenting salts,
 And potent to resist the freezing blast ;
 For, ere the beech and elm have cast their leaf
 Deciduous, when now November dark
 Checks vegetation in the torpid plant,
 Expos'd to his cold breath, the task begins.
 Warily therefore, and with prudent heed
 He seeks a favour'd spot : that where he builds
 Th' agglomerated pile his frame may front
 The sun's meridian disk, and at the back
 Enjoy close shelter, wall, or reeds, or hedge
 Impervious to the wind.

Having further prepared the ground :

Th' uplifted frame, compact at every joint,
And overlaid with clear translucent glass,
He settles next upon the sloping mount,
Whose sharp declivity shoots off secure
From the dash'd pane the deluge as it falls.

The writing of blank verse puts the poet to the severest test, and Cowper does not survive the test. Had *The Task* been written in couplets he might have been forced to sharpen his wit by the necessity of rhyme. As it is, he is merely ponderous—a snail of imagination labouring under a heavy shell of eloquence. In the fragment called *Yardley Oak* he undoubtedly achieved something worthier of a distant disciple of Milton. But I do not think he was ever sufficiently preoccupied with poetry to be a good poet. He had even ceased to read poetry by the time he began in earnest to write it. “I reckon it,” he wrote in 1781, “among my principal advantages, as a composer of verses, that I have not read an English poet these thirteen years, and but one these thirty years.” So mild was his interest in his contemporaries that he had never heard Collins’s name till he read about him in Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*. Though descended from Donne—his mother was Anne Donne—he was apparently more interested in Churchill and Beattie than in him. His one great poetical master in English was

Milton, Johnson's disparagement of whom he resented with amusing vehemence. He was probably the least bookish poet who had ever had a classical education. He described himself in a letter to the Rev. Walter Bagot, in his later years, as "a poor man who has but twenty books in the world, and two of them are your brother Chester's." The passages I have quoted give, no doubt, an exaggerated impression of Cowper's indifference to literature. His relish for such books as he enjoyed is proved in many of his letters. But he was incapable of such enthusiasm for the great things in literature as Keats showed, for instance, in his sonnet on Chapman's *Homer*. Though Cowper, disgusted with Pope, took the extreme step of translating Homer into English verse, he enjoyed even Homer only with certain evangelical reservations. "I should not have chosen to have been the original author of such a business," he declared, while he was translating the nineteenth book of the *Iliad*, "even though all the Nine had stood at my elbow. Time has wonderful effects. We admire that in an ancient for which we should send a modern bard to Bedlam." It is hardly to be wondered at that his translation of Homer has not survived, while his delightful translation of Vincent Bourne's *Jackdaw* has.

Cowper's poetry, however, is to be praised, if for nothing else, because it played so great a part in giving the world a letter-writer of genius. It brought him one of the best of his correspondents, his cousin, Lady Hesketh, and it gave various other people a reason for keeping his letters. Had it not been for his fame as a poet his letters might never have been published, and we should have missed one of the most exquisite histories of small beer to be had outside the pages of Jane Austen. As a letter-writer he does not, I think, stand in the same rank as Horace Walpole and Charles Lamb. He has less wit and humour, and he mirrors less of the world. His letters, however, have an extraordinarily soothing charm. Cowper's occupations amuse one, while his nature delights one. His letters, like Lamb's, have a soul of goodness—not of mere virtue, but of goodness—and we know from his biography that in life he endured the severest test to which a good nature can be subjected. His treatment of Mrs. Unwin in the imbecile despotism of her old age was as fine in its way as Lamb's treatment of his sister. Mrs. Unwin, who had supported Cowper through so many dark and suicidal hours, afterwards became palsied and lost her mental faculties. "Her character," as Sir James Frazer writes in the introduction to his charming

selection from the letters, "underwent a great change, and she who for years had found all her happiness in ministering to her afflicted friend, and seemed to have no thought but for his welfare, now became quèrulous and exacting, forgetful of him and mindful, apparently, only of herself. Unable to move out of her chair without help, or to walk across the room unless supported by two people, her speech at times almost unintelligible, she deprived him of all his wonted exercises, both bodily and mental, as she did not choose that he should leave her for a moment, or even use a pen or a book, except when he read to her. To these demands he responded with all the devotion of gratitude and affection; he was assiduous in his attentions to her, but the strain told heavily on his strength." To know all this does not modify our opinion of Cowper's letters, except in so far as it strengthens it. It helps us, however, to explain to ourselves, why we love them. We love them because, as surely as the writings of Shakespeare and Lamb, they are an expression of that sort of heroic gentleness which can endure the fires of the most devastating tragedy. Shakespeare finally revealed the strong sweetness of his nature in *The Tempest*. Many people are inclined to over-estimate *The Tempest* as poetry simply because it gives them so precious a clue to

the character of his genius, and makes clear once more that the grand source and material of poetry is the infinite tenderness of the human heart. Cowper's letters are a tiny thing beside Shakespeare's plays. But the same light falls on them. They have an eighteenth-century restraint and freedom from emotionalism and gush. But behind their chronicle of trifles, their small fancies, their little vanities, one is aware of an intensely loving and lovable personality. Cowper's poem, *To Mary*, written to Mrs. Unwin in the days of her feebleness, is, to my mind, made commonplace by the odious reiteration of "My Mary!" at the end of every verse. Leave the "my Marys" out, however, and see how beautiful, as well as moving; a poem it becomes. Cowper was at one time on the point of marrying Mrs. Unwin, when an attack of madness prevented him. Later on Lady Austen apparently wished to marry him. He had an extraordinary gift for commanding the affections of those of both sexes who knew him. His friendship with the poet Hayley, then a rocket fallen to earth, towards the close of his life, reveals the lovableness of both men.

If we love Cowper, then, it is not only because of his little world, but because of his greatness of soul that stands in contrast to it. He is like one of those

tiny pools among the rocks, left behind by the deep waters of ocean and reflecting the blue height of the sky. His most trivial actions acquire a pathos from what we know of the *De Profundis* that is behind them. When we read of the Olney household—"our snug parlour, one lady knitting, the other netting, and the gentleman winding worsted"—we feel that this marionette-show has some second and immortal significance. On another day, "one of the ladies has been playing a harpsichord, while I, with the other, have been playing at battledore and shuttlecock." It is a game of cherubs, though of cherubs slightly unfeathered as a result of belonging to the pious English upper-middle classes. The poet, inclined to be fat, whose chief occupation in winter is "to walk ten times in a day from the fireside to his cucumber-frame and back again," is busy enough on a heavenly errand. With his pet hares, his goldfinches, his dog, his carpentry, his greenhouse—"Is not our greenhouse a cabinet of perfumes?"—his clergymen, his ladies, and his tasks, he is not only constantly amusing himself, but carrying on a secret battle with all the terrors of Hell. He is, indeed, a pilgrim who struggles out of one slough of despond only to fall waist-deep into another. This strange creature who passed so much of his time writing such things as *Verses*

written at Bath on Finding the Heel of a Shoe, Ode to Apollo on an Ink-glass almost dried in the Sun, Lines sent with Two Cockscombs to Miss Green, and On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch, stumbled along under a load of woe and repentance as terrible as any of the sorrows that we read of in the great tragedies. The last of his original poems, *The Castaway*, is an image of his utter hopelessness. As he lay dying in 1800 he was asked how he felt. He replied, "I feel unutterable despair." To face damnation with the sweet unselfishness of William Cowper is a rare and saintly accomplishment. It gives him a place in the company of the beloved authors with men of far greater genius than himself—with Shakespeare and Lamb and Dickens.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has, in one of his essays, expressed the opinion that of all the English poets "the one who, but for a stroke of madness, would have become our English Horace was William Cowper. He had the wit," he added, "with the underlying moral seriousness." As for the wit, I doubt it. Cowper had not the wit that inevitably hardens into "jewels five words long." Laboriously as he sought after perfection in his verse, he was never a master of the Horatian phrase. Such phrases of his—and there are not many of them—as have passed into the common speech flash neither

with wit nor with wisdom. Take the best-known of them :

“ The cups
That cheer but not inebriate ; ”

“ God made the country and man made the town ; ”

“ I am monarch of all I survey ; ”

“ Regions Cæsar never knew ; ”

“ England, with all thy faults, I love thee still ! ”

This is lead for gold. Horace, it is true, must be judged as something more than an inventor of golden tags. But no man can hope to succeed Horace unless his lines and phrases are of the kind that naturally pass into golden tags. This, I know, is a matter not only of style but of temper. But it is in temper as much as in style that Cowper differs from Horace. Horace mixed on easy terms with the world. He enjoyed the same pleasures ; he paid his respects to the same duties. He was a man of the world above all other poets. Cowper was in comparison a man of the parlour. His sensibilities would, I fancy, have driven him into retreat, even if he had been neither mad nor pious. He was the very opposite of a worldling. He was, as he said of himself in his early thirties, “ of a very singular temper, and very unlike all the men that I have ever conversed with.” While claiming that

he was not an absolute fool, he added : " If I was as fit for the next world as I am unfit for this—and God forbid I should speak it in vanity—I would not change conditions with any saint in Christendom." Had Horace lived in the eighteenth century he would almost certainly have been a Deist. Cowper was very nearly a Methodist. The difference, indeed, between them is fundamental. Horace was a pig, though a charming one ; Cowper was a pigeon.

This being so, it seems to me a mistake to regard Cowper as a Horace *manqué*, instead of being content with his miraculous achievement as a letter-writer. It may well be that his sufferings, so far from destroying his real genius, harrowed and fertilized the soil in which it grew. He unquestionably was more ambitious for his verse than for his prose. He wrote his letters without labour, while he was never weary of using the file on his poems. " To touch and retouch," he once wrote to the Rev. William Unwin, " is, though some writers boast of negligence, and others would be ashamed to show their foul copies, the secret of almost all good writing, especially in verse. I am never weary of it myself." Even if we count him only a middling poet, however, this does not mean that all his fastidiousness of composition was wasted. He

acquired in the workshop of verse the style that stood him in such good stead in the field of familiar prose. It is because of this hard-won ease of style that readers of English will never grow weary of that epistolary autobiography in which he recounts his maniacal fear that his food has been poisoned ; his open-eyed wonder at balloons ; the story of his mouse ; the cure of the distention of his stomach by Lady Hesketh's gingerbread ; the pulling out of a tooth at the dinner-table unperceived by the other guests ; his desire to thrash Dr. Johnson till his pension jingled in his pocket ; and the mildly fantastic tastes to which he confesses in such a paragraph as :

I know no beast in England whose voice I do not account musical save and except always the braying of an ass. The notes of all our birds and fowls please me without one exception. I should not indeed think of keeping a goose in a cage, that I might hang him up in the parlour for the sake of his melody, but a goose upon a common, or in a farm-yard, is no bad performer.

Here he is no missfire rival of Horace or Milton or Prior, or any of the other poets. Here he has arrived at the perfection for which he was born. How much better he was fitted to be a letter-writer than a poet may be seen by anyone who compares his treatment of the same incidents in verse and in prose. There is, for instance, that charming

letter about the escaped goldfinch, which is not spoiled for us even though we may take Blake's view of caged birds :

I have two goldfinches, which in the summer occupy the greenhouse. A few days since, being employed in cleaning out their cages, I placed that which I had in hand upon the table, while the other hung against the wall ; the windows and the doors stood wide open. I went to fill the fountain at the pump, and on my return was not a little surprised to find a goldfinch sitting on the top of the cage I had been cleaning, and singing to and kissing the goldfinch within. I approached him, and he discovered no fear ; still nearer, and he discovered none. I advanced my hand towards him, and he took no notice of it. I seized him, and supposed I had caught a new bird, but casting my eye upon the other cage perceived my mistake. Its inhabitant, during my absence, had contrived to find an opening, where the wire had been a little bent, and made no other use of the escape it afforded him, than to salute his friend, and to converse with him more intimately than he had done before. I returned him to his proper mansion, but in vain. In less than a minute he had thrust his little person through the aperture again, and again perched upon his neighbour's cage, kissing him, as at the first, and singing, as if transported with the fortunate adventure. I could not but respect such friendship, as for the sake of its gratification had twice declined an opportunity to be free, and, consenting to their union, resolved that for the future one cage should hold them both. I am glad of such incidents ; for at a pinch, and when I need entertainment, the versification of them serves to divert me. . . .

Cowper's " versification " of the incident is vapid compared to this. The incident of the viper and the kittens again, which he " versified " in *The*

Colubriad, is chronicled far more charmingly in the letters. His quiet prose gave him a vehicle for that intimacy of the heart and fancy which was the deepest need of his nature. He made a full confession of himself only to his friends. In one of his letters he compares himself, as he rises in the morning to "an infernal frog out of Acheron, covered with the ooze and mud of melancholy." In his most ambitious verse he is a frog trying to blow himself out into a bull. It is the frog in him, not the intended bull, that makes friends with us to-day.

VII.—A NOTE ON ELIZABETHAN PLAYS

VOLTAIRE'S criticism of Shakespeare as rude and barbarous has only one fault. It does not fit Shakespeare. Shakespeare, however, is the single dramatist of his age to whom it is not in a measure applicable. "He was a savage," said Voltaire, "who has imagination. He has written many happy lines; but his pieces can please only in London and in Canada." Had this been said of Marlowe, or Chapman, or Jonson (despite his learning), or Cyril Tourneur, one might differ, but one would admit that perhaps there was something in it. Again, Voltaire's boast that he had been the first to show the French "some pearls which I had found" in the "enormous dunghill" of Shakespeare's plays was the sort of thing that might reasonably have been said by an anthologist who had made selections from Dekker or Beaumont and Fletcher or any dramatist writing under Elizabeth and James except William Shakespeare. One reads the average Elizabethan play in the certainty that the pearls will be few and the rubbish-

heap all but five acts high. There are, perhaps, a dozen Elizabethan plays apart from Shakespeare's that are as great as his third-best work. But there are no *Hamlets* or *Lears* among them. There are no *Midsummer Night's Dreams*. There is not even a *Winter's Tale*.

If Lamb, then, had boasted about what he had done for the Elizabethans in general in the terms used by Voltaire concerning himself and Shakespeare his claim would have been just. Lamb, however, was free from Voltaire's vanity. He did not feel that he was shedding lustre on the Elizabethans as a patron: he regarded himself as a borrower. Voltaire was infuriated by the suggestion that Shakespeare wrote better than himself; Lamb probably looked on even Cyril Tourneur as his superior. Lamb was in this as wide of the mark as Voltaire had been. His reverent praise has made famous among virgins and boys many an old dramatist who but for him would long ago have been thrown to the antiquaries, and have deserved to be. Everyone goes to the Elizabethans at some time or another in the hope of coming on a long succession of sleeping beauties. The ordinary man retires disappointed from the quest. He would have to be unusually open to suggestion not to be disappointed at the first reading of most of the plays. Many a

man can read the Elizabethans with Charles Lamb's enthusiasm, however, who never could have read them with his own.

One day, when Swinburne was looking over Mr. Gosse's books, he took down Lamb's *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets*, and, turning to Mr. Gosse, said, "That book taught me more than any other book in the world—that and the Bible." Swinburne was a notorious borrower of other men's enthusiasms. He borrowed republicanism from Landor and Mazzini, the Devil from Baudelaire, and the Elizabethans from Lamb. He had not, as Lamb had, Elizabethan blood in his veins. Lamb had the Elizabethan love of phrases that have cost a voyage, of fancies discovered in a cave. Swinburne had none of this rich taste in speech. He used words riotously, but he did not use great words riotously. He was excitedly extravagant where Lamb was carefully extravagant. He often seemed to be bent chiefly on making a beautiful noise. Nor was this the only point on which he was opposed to Lamb and the Elizabethans. He differed fundamentally from them in his attitude to the spectacle of life. His mood was the mood not of a spectator but of a revivalist. He lectured his generation on the deadly virtues. He was far more anxious to shock the drawing-room than to enter-

tain the bar-parlour. Lamb himself was little enough of a formal Puritan. He felt that the wings both of the virtues and the vices had been clipped by the descendants of the Puritans. He did not scold, however, but retired into the spectacle of another century. He wandered among old plays like an exile returning with devouring eyes to a dusty ancestral castle. Swinburne, for his part, cared little for seeing things and much for saying things. As a result, a great deal of his verse—and still more of his prose—has the heat of an argument rather than the warmth of life.

His posthumous book on the Elizabethans is liveliest when it is most argumentative. Swinburne is less amusing when he is exalting the Elizabethans than when he is cleaving the skull of a pet aversion. His style is an admirable one for faction-fighting, but is less suitable for intimate conversation. He writes in superlatives that give one the impression that he is furious about something or other even when he is being fairly sensible. His criticism has thus an air of being much more insane than it is. His estimates of Chapman and Richard Brome are both far more moderate and reasonable than appears at first reading. He out-Lambs Lamb, in his appreciativeness; but one cannot accuse him of injudicious excess when he says of Brome:

Were he now alive, he would be a brilliant and able competitor in their own field of work and study with such admirable writers as Mrs. Oliphant and Mr. Norris.

Brome, I think, is better than this implies. Swinburne is not going many leagues too far when he calls *The Antipodes* "one of the most fanciful and delightful farces in the world." It is a piece of poetic low comedy that will almost certainly entertain and delight any reader who goes to it expecting to be bored.

It is safe to say of most of the Elizabethan dramatists that the ordinary reader must fulfil one of two conditions if he is not to be disappointed in them. He must not expect to find them giants on the Shakespeare scale. Better still, he must turn to them as to a continent or age of poetry, rather than for the genius of separate plays. Of most of them it may be said that their age is greater than they—that they are glorified by their period rather than glorify it. They are figures in a golden and teeming landscape, and one moves among them under the spell of their noble circumstances.

They are less great individually than in the mass. If they are giants, few of them are giants who can stand on their own legs. They prop one another up. There are not more than a dozen Elizabethan plays that are individually worth a superlative, as a

novel by Jane Austen or a sonnet by Wordsworth is. The Elizabethan lyrics are an immensely more precious possession than the plays. The best of the dramatists, indeed, were poets by destiny and dramatists by accident. It is conceivable that the greatest of them apart from Shakespeare—Marlowe and Jonson and Webster and Dekker—might have been greater writers if the English theatre had never existed. Shakespeare alone was as great in the theatre as in poetry. Jonson, perhaps, also came near being so. *The Alchemist* is a brilliant heavy-weight comedy, which one would hardly sacrifice even for another of Jonson's songs. As for Dekker, on the other hand, much as one admires the excellent style in which he writes as well as the fine poetry and comedy which survive in his dialogue, his *Sweet Content* is worth all the purely dramatic work he ever wrote.

One thing that differentiates the other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists from Shakespeare is their comparative indifference to human nature. There is too much mechanical malice in their tragedies and too little of the passion that every man recognizes in his own breast. Even so good a play as *The Duchess of Malfi* is marred by inadequacy of motive on the part of the duchess's persecutors. Similarly, in Chapman's *Bussy d'*

Ambois; the villains are simply a dramatist's infernal machines. Shakespeare's own plays contain numerous examples of inadequacy of motive—the casting-off of Cordelia by her father, for instance, and in part the revenge of Iago. But, if we accept the first act of *King Lear* as an incident in a fairy-tale, the motive of the passion of Lear in the other four acts is not only adequate but overwhelming. *Othello* breaks free from mechanism of plot in a similar way. Shakespeare as a writer of the fiction of human nature was as supreme among his contemporaries as was Gulliver among the Lilliputians.

Having recognized this, one can begin to enjoy the Elizabethan dramatists again. Lamb and Coleridge and Hazlitt found them lying flat, and it was natural that they should raise them up and set them affectionately on pedestals for the gaze of a too indifferent world. The modern reader, accustomed to seeing them on their pedestals, however, is tempted to wish that they were lying flat again. Most of the Elizabethans deserve neither fate. They should be left neither flat nor standing on separate pedestals, but leaning at an angle of about forty-five degrees—resting against the base of Shakespeare's colossal statue.

Had Swinburne written of them all as imagin-

atively as he has written of Chapman, his interpretations, excessive though they often are, would have added to one's enjoyment of them. His *Chapman* gives us a portrait of a character. Several of the chapters in *Contemporaries of Shakespeare*, however, are, apart from the strong language, little more inspiring than the summaries of novels and plays in a school history of literature. Even Mr. Gosse himself, if I remember right, in his *Life of Swinburne*, described one of the chapters as "unreadable." The book as a whole is not that. But it unquestionably shows us some of the minor Elizabethans by fog rather than by the full light of day.

VIII.—EDWARD YOUNG AS CRITIC

SO little is Edward Young read in these days that we have almost forgotten how wide was his influence in the eighteenth century. It was not merely that he was popular in England, where his satires, *The Love of Fame*, *the Universal Passion*, are said to have made him £3,000. He was also a power on the Continent. His *Night Thoughts* was translated not only into all the major languages, but into Portuguese, Swedish and Magyar. It was adopted as one of the heralds of the romantic movement in France. Even his *Conjectures on Original Composition*, written in 1759 in the form of a letter to Samuel Richardson, earned in foreign countries a fame that has lasted till our own day. A new edition of the German translation was published at Bonn so recently as 1910. In England there is no famous author more assiduously neglected. Not so much as a line is quoted from him in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. I recently turned up a fairly full anthology of eighteenth-century verse only to find that though it has room for Mallet and

Ambrose Phillips and Picken, Young has not been allowed to contribute a purple patch even five lines long. One looks round one's own shelves, and they tell the same story. Small enough poets stand there in shivering neglect. Akenside, Churchill and Parnell have all been thought worth keeping. But not on the coldest, topmost shelf has space been found for Young. He scarcely survives even in popular quotations. The copy-books have perpetuated one line :

Procrastination is the thief of time.

Apart from that, *Night Thoughts* have been swallowed up in an eternal night.

And certainly a study of the titles of his works will not encourage the average reader to go to him in search of treasures of the imagination. At the age of thirty, in 1713, he wrote a *Poem on the Last Day*, which he dedicated to Queen Anne. In the following year he wrote *The Force of Religion, or Vanquish'd Love*, a poem about Lady Jane Grey, which he dedicated to the Countess of Salisbury. And no sooner was Queen Anne dead than he made haste to salute the rising sun in an epistle *On the Late Queen's Death and His Majesty's Accession to the Throne*. Passing over a number of years, we find him, in 1730, publishing a so-called Pindaric ode,

Imperium Pelagi; a Naval Lyric, in the preface to which he declares with characteristic italics: "Trade is a very noble subject in itself; more proper than any for an Englishman; and particularly seasonable at this juncture." Add to this that he was the son of a dean, that he married the daughter of an earl, and that, other means of advancement having failed, he became a clergyman at the age of between forty and fifty, and the suggested portrait is that of a prudent hanger-on rather than a fiery man of genius. His prudence was rewarded with a pension of £200 a year, a Royal Chaplaincy, and the position (after George III.'s accession) of Clerk of the Closet to the Princess Dowager. In the opinion of Young himself, who lived till the age of 82, the reward was inadequate. At the age of 79, however, he had conquered his disappointment to a sufficient degree to write a poem on *Resignation*.

Readers who, after a hasty glance at his biography, are inclined to look satirically on Young as a time-server, oily with the mediocrity of self-help, will have a pleasant surprise if they read his *Conjectures on Original Composition* for the first time. It is a bold and masculine essay in literary criticism, written in a style of quite brilliant, if old-fashioned, rhetoric. Mrs. Thrale said of it: "In the *Conjectures upon Original Composition* . . . we shall

perhaps read the wittiest piece of prose our whole language has to boast ; yet from its over-twinkling, it seems too little gazed at and too little admired perhaps." This is an exaggerated estimate. Dr. Johnson, who heard Young read the *Conjectures* at Richardson's house, said that " he was surprised to find Young receive as novelties what he thought very common maxims." If one tempers Mrs. Thrale's enthusiasm with Dr. Johnson's scorn, one will have a fairly just idea of the quality of Young's book.

It is simply a shot fired with a good aim in the eternal war between authority and liberty in literature. This is a controversy for which, were men wise, there would be no need. We require in literature both the authority of tradition and the liberty of genius to seek new conquests. Unfortunately, we cannot agree as to the proportions in which each of them is required. The French exaggerated the importance of tradition, and so gave us the classical drama of Racine and Corneille. Walt Whitman exaggerated the importance of liberty, and so gave us *Leaves of Grass*. In nearly all periods of literary energy, we find writers rushing to one or other of these extremes. Either they declare that the classics are perfect and cannot be surpassed but only imitated ; or, like the Futurists,

they wish to burn the classics and release the spirit of man for new adventures. It is all a prolonged duel between reaction and revolution, the wise man of genius doing his best, like a Liberal, to bring the two opponents to terms.

Much of the interest of Young's book is due to the fact that in an age of reaction he came out on the revolutionary side. There was seldom a time at which the classics were more slavishly idolized and imitated. Miss Morley quotes from Pope the saying that "all that is left us is to recommend our productions by the imitation of the ancients." Young threw all his eloquence on the opposite side. He uttered the bold paradox: "The less we copy the renowned ancients, we shall resemble them the more." "Become a noble collateral," he advised, "not a humble descendant from them. Let us build our compositions in the spirit, and in the taste, of the ancients, but not with their materials. Thus will they resemble the structures of Pericles at Athens, which Plutarch commends for having had an air of antiquity as soon as they were built." He refuses to believe that the moderns are necessarily inferior to the ancients. If they are inferior, it is because they plagiarize from the ancients instead of emulating them. "If ancients and moderns," he declares, "were no longer considered as masters

and pupils, but as hard-matched rivals for renown, the moderns, by the longevity of their labours, might one day become ancients themselves."

He deplores the fact that Pope should have been so content to indenture his genius to the work of translation and imitation :

Though we stand much obliged to him for giving us an Homer, yet had he doubled our obligation by giving us—a Pope. He had a strong imagination and the true sublime? That granted, we might have had two Homers instead of one, if longer had been his life ; for I heard the dying swan talk over an epic plan a few weeks before his decease.

For ourselves, we hold that Pope showed himself to be as original as needs be in his epistles to Martha Blount and Dr. Arbuthnot. None the less, the general philosophy of Young's remarks is sound enough. We should reverence tradition in literature, but not superstitiously. Too much awe of the old masters may easily scare a modern into hiding his talent in a napkin. True, we are not in much danger of servitude to tradition in literature to-day. We no longer imitate the ancients ; we only imitate each other. On the whole, we wish there was rather more sense of the tradition in contemporary writing. The danger of arbitrary egoism is quite as great as the danger of classicism. Luckily, Young, in stating the case against the classicists, has at the

same time stated perfectly the case for familiarity with the classics. "It is," he declares, "by a sort of noble contagion, from a general familiarity with their writings, and not by any particular sordid theft, that we can be the better for those who went before us." However we may deride a servile classicism, we should always assume at the outset the necessity of the "noble contagion" for every man of letters.

The truth is, the man of letters must in some way reconcile himself to the paradox that he is at once the acolyte and the rival of the ancients. Young is optimistic enough to believe that it is possible to surpass them. In the mechanic arts, he complains, men are always attempting to go beyond their predecessors; in the liberal arts, they merely try to follow them. The analogy between the continuous advance of science and a possible continuous advance in literature is, perhaps, a misleading one. Professor Gilbert Murray, in *Religio Grammatici*, bases much of his argument on a denial that such an analogy should be drawn. Literary genius cannot be bequeathed and added to as a scientific discovery can. The modern poet does not stand on Shakespeare's shoulders as the modern astronomer stands on Galileo's shoulders. Scientific discovery is progressive. Literary genius, like religious genius,

is a miracle less dependent on time. None the less, we may reasonably believe that literature, like science, has ever new worlds to conquer—that, even if Æschylus and Shakespeare cannot be surpassed, names as great as theirs may one day be added to the roll of literary fame. And this will be possible only if men in each generation are determined, in the words of Goldsmith, “bravely to shake off admiration, and, undazzled by the splendour of another’s reputation, to chalk out a path to fame for themselves, and boldly cultivate untried experiment.” Goldsmith wrote these words in *The Bee* in the same year in which Young’s *Conjectures* was published. I feel tolerably certain that he wrote them as a result of reading Young’s work. The reaction against traditionalism, however, was gathering general force by this time, and the desire to be original was beginning to oust the desire to copy. Both Young’s and Goldsmith’s essays are exceedingly interesting as anticipations of the romantic movement. Young was a true romantic when he wrote that Nature “brings us into the world all Originals—no two faces, no two minds, are just alike; but all bear evident marks of separation on them. Born Originals, how comes it to pass that we are Copies?” Genius, he thinks, is commoner than is sometimes supposed, if we

would make use of it. His book is a plea for giving genius its head. He wishes to see the modern writer, instead of tilling an exhausted soil, staking out a claim in the perfectly virgin field of his own experience. He cannot teach you to be a man of genius ; he could not even teach himself to be one. But at least he lays down many of the right rules for the use of genius. His book marks a revolutionary stage in the development of English literary criticism.

IX.—GRAY AND COLLINS

THERE seems to be a definite connection between good writing and indolence. The men whom we call stylists have, most of them, been idlers. From Horace to Robert Louis Stevenson, nearly all have been pigs from the sty of Epicurus. They have not, to use an excellent Anglo-Irish word, "industered" like insects or millionaires. The greatest men, one must admit, have mostly been as punctual at their labours as the sun—as fiery and inexhaustible. But, then, one does not think of the greatest writers as stylists. They are so much more than that. The style of Shakespeare is infinitely more marvellous than the style of Gray. But one hardly thinks of style in presence of the sea or a range of mountains or in reading Shakespeare. His munificent and gorgeous genius was as far above style as the statesmanship of Pericles or the sanctity of Joan of Arc was above good manners. The world has not endorsed Ben Jonson's retort to those who commended Shakespeare for never having "blotted out" a line: "Would he had blotted out a thou-

sand ! ” We feel that so vast a genius is beyond the perfection of control we look for in a stylist. There may be badly-written scenes in Shakespeare, and pot-house jokes, and wordy hyperboles, but with all this there are enchanted continents which we may continue to explore though we live to be a hundred.

The fact that the noble impatience of a Shakespeare is above our fault-finding, however, must not be used to disparage the lazy patience of good writing. An Æschylus or a Shakespeare, a Browning or a Dickens, conquers us with an abundance like nature's. He feeds us out of a horn of plenty. This, unfortunately, is possible only to writers of the first order. The others when they attempt profusion, become fluent rather than abundant, facile of ink rather than generous of golden grain. Who does not agree with Pope that Dryden, though not Shakespeare, would have been a better poet if he had learned :

The last and greatest art—the art to blot ?

Who is there who would not rather have written a single ode of Gray's than all the poetical works of Southey ? If voluminousness alone made a man a great writer, we should have to canonize Lord Lytton. The truth is, literary genius has no rule

either of voluminousness or of the opposite. The genius of one writer is a world ever moving. The genius of another is a garden often still. The greatest genius is undoubtedly of the former kind. But as there is hardly enough genius of this kind to fill a wall, much less a library, we may well encourage the lesser writers to cultivate their gardens, and, in the absence of the wilder tumult of creation, to delight us with blooms of leisurely phrase and quiet thought.

Gray and Collins were both writers who laboured in little gardens. Collins, indeed, had a small flower-bed—perhaps only a pot—rather than a garden. He produced in it one perfect bloom—the *Ode to Evening*. The rest of his work is carefully written, inoffensive, historically interesting. But his continual personification of abstract ideas makes the greater part of his verse lifeless as allegories or as sculpture in a graveyard. He was a romantic, an inventor of new forms, in his own day. He seems academic to ours. His work is that of a man striking an attitude rather than of one expressing the deeps of a passionate nature. He is always careful not to confess. His *Ode to Fear* does not admit us to any of the secrets of his maniacal and melancholy breast. It is an anticipation of the factitious gloom of

Byron, not of the nerve-shattered gloom of Dostoevsky. Collins, we cannot help feeling, says in it what he does not really think. He glorifies fear as though it were the better part of imagination, going so far as to end his ode with the lines :

O thou whose spirit most possessed
The sacred seat of Shakespeare's breast !
By all that from thy prophet broke
In thy divine emotions spoke :
Hither again thy fury deal,
Teach me but once, like him, to feel ;
His cypress wreath my meed decree,
And I, O Fear, will dwell with thee !

We have only to compare these lines with Claudio's terrible speech about death in *Measure for Measure* to see the difference between pretence and passion in literature. Shakespeare had no fear of telling us what he knew about fear. Collins lived in a more reticent century, and attempted to fob off a disease on us as an accomplishment. What perpetually delights us in the *Ode to Evening* is that here at least Collins can tell the truth without falsification or chilling rhetoric. Here he is writing of the world as he has really seen it and been moved by it. He still makes use of personifications, but they have been transmuted by his emotion into imagery. In these exquisite formal unrhymed lines, Collins has summed up his view and dream of life. One knows that he was not lying or bent upon expressing any

man's experiences but his own when he described how the

Air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat,
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn.

He speaks here, not in the stiffness of rhetoric, but in the liberty of a new mood, never, for all he knew or cared, expressed before. As far as all the rest of his work is concerned, his passion for style is more or less wasted. But the *Ode to Evening* justifies both his pains and his indolence. As for the pains he took with his work, we have it on the authority of Thomas Warton that "all his odes . . . had the marks of repeated correction: he was perpetually changing his epithets." As for his indolence, his uncle, Colonel Martin, thought him "too indolent even for the Army," and advised him to enter the Church—a step from which he was dissuaded, we are told, by "a tobacconist in Fleet Street." For the rest, he was the son of a hatter, and went mad. He is said to have haunted the cloisters of Chichester Cathedral during his fits of melancholia, and to have uttered a strange accompaniment of groans and howls during the playing of the organ. The Castle of Indolence was for Collins no keep of the pleasures. One may doubt

if it is ever this for any artist. Did not even Horace attempt to escape into Stoicism ? Did not Stevenson write *Pulvis et Umbra* ?

Assuredly Gray, though he was as fastidious in his appetites as Collins was wild, cannot be called in as a witness to prove the Castle of Indolence a happy place. "Low spirits," he wrote, when he was still an undergraduate, "are my true and faithful companions ; they get up with me, go to bed with me, make journeys and return as I do ; nay, and pay visits, and will even affect to be jocose, and force a feeble laugh with me." The end of the sentence shows (as do his letters, indeed, and his verses on the drowning of Horace Walpole's cat) that his indolent melancholy was not without its compensations. He was a wit, an observer of himself and the world about him, a man who wrote letters that have the genius of the essay. Further he was Horace Walpole's friend, and (while his father had a devil in him) his mother and his aunts made a circle of quiet tenderness into which he could always retire. "I do not remember," Mr. Gosse has said of Gray, "that the history of literature presents us with the memoirs of any other poet favoured by nature with so many aunts as Gray possessed." This delicious sentence contains an important criticism of Gray. Gray was a poet of

the sheltered life. His genius was shy and retiring. He had no ambition to thrust himself upon the world. He kept himself to himself, as the saying goes. He published the *Elegy in a Country Church-yard* in 1751 only because the editors of the *Magazine of Magazines* had got hold of a copy and Gray was afraid that they would publish it first. How lethargic a poet Gray was may be gathered from the fact that he began the *Elegy* as far back as 1746—Mason says it was begun in August, 1742—and did not finish it until June 12, 1750. Probably there is no other short poem in English literature which was brooded over for so many seasons. Nor was there ever a greater justification for patient brooding. Gray in this poem liberated the English imagination after half a century of prose and rhetoric. He restored poetry to its true function as the confession of an individual soul. Wordsworth has blamed Gray for introducing, or at least, assisting to introduce, the curse of poetic diction into English literature. But poetic diction was in use long before Gray. He is remarkable among English poets, not for having succumbed to poetic diction, but for having triumphed over it. It is poetic feeling, not poetic diction, that distinguishes him from the mass of eighteenth-century writers. It is an interesting coincidence

that Gray and Collins should have brought about a poetic revival by the rediscovery of the beauty of evening, just as Mr. Yeats and "A.E.," brought about a poetic revival in our own day by the rediscovery of the beauty of twilight. Both schools of poetry (if it is permissible to call them schools) found in the stillness of the evening a natural refuge for the individual soul from the tyrannical prose of common day. There have been critics, including Matthew Arnold, who have denied that the *Elegy* is the greatest of Gray's poems. This, I think, can only be because they have been unable to see the poetry for the quotations. No other poem that Gray ever wrote was a miracle. *The Bard* is a masterpiece of imaginative rhetoric. But the *Elegy* is more than this. It is an autobiography and the creation of a world for the hearts of men. Here Gray delivers the secret doctrine of the poets. Here he escapes out of the eighteenth century into immortality. One realizes what an effort it must have been to rise above his century when one reads an earlier version of some of his most famous lines :

Some village Cato (——) with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood ;
Some mute, inglorious Tully here may rest ;
Some Cæsar guiltless of his country's blood.

Could there be a more effective example of the

return to reality than we find in the final shape of this verse ?

Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood ;
Some mute, inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

It is as though suddenly it had been revealed to Gray that poetry is not a mere literary exercise but the image of reality ; that it does not consist in vain admiration of models far off in time and place, but that it is as near to one as one's breath and one's country. Not that the *Elegy* would have been one of the great poems of the world if it had never plunged deeper into the heart than in this verse. It is a poem of beauty and sorrow that cannot be symbolized by such public figures as Cromwell and Milton. Here the genius of the parting day, and all that it means to the imagination, its quiet movement and its music, its pensiveness and its regrets, have been given a form more lasting than bronze. Perhaps the poem owes a part of its popularity to the fact that it is a great homily, though a homily transfigured. But then does not *Hamlet* owe a great part of its popularity to the fact that it is (among other things) a great blood-and-thunder play with duels and a ghost ?

One of the so-called mysteries of literature is the fact that Gray, having written so greatly, should

have written so little. He spoke of himself as a "shrimp of an author," and expressed the fear that his works might be mistaken for those of "a pismire or a flea." But to make a mystery of the indolence of a rather timid, idle, and unadventurous scholar, who was blessed with more fastidiousness than passion, is absurd. To say perfectly once and for all what one has to say is surely as fine an achievement as to keep restlessly trying to say it a thousand times over. Gray was no blabber. It is said that he did not even let his mother and his aunts know that he wrote poetry. He lacked boldness, volubility and vital energy. He stood aside from life. He would not even take money from his publishers for his poetry. No wonder that he earned the scorn of Dr. Johnson, who said of him to Boswell, "Sir, he was dull in his company, dull in his closet, dull everywhere. He was dull in a new way, and that made many think him great." Luckily, Gray's reserve tempted him into his own heart and into external nature for safety and consolation. Johnson could see in him only a "mechanical poet." To most of us he seems the first natural poet in modern literature.

X.—ASPECTS OF SHELLEY

(1) THE CHARACTER HALF COMIC

SHELLEY is one of the most difficult of men of genius to portray. It is easy enough to attack him or defend him—to damn him as an infidel or to praise him because he made Harriet Westbrook so miserable that she threw herself into the Serpentine. But this is an entirely different thing from recapturing the likeness of the man from the nine hundred and ninety-nine anecdotes that are told of him. These for the most part leave him with an air of absurdity. In his habit of ignoring facts he appeals again and again to one's sense of the comic, like a drunken man who fails to see the kerb or who walks into a wall. He was indeed drunken with doctrine. He lived almost as much from doctrine as from passion. He pursued theories as a child chases butterflies. There is a story told of his Oxford days which shows how eccentrically his theories converted themselves into conduct. Having been reading Plato with Hogg, and having soaked himself

in the theory of pre-existence and reminiscence, he was walking on Magdalen Bridge when he met a woman with a child in her arms. He seized the child, while its mother, thinking he was about to throw it into the river, clung on to it by the clothes. "Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, madam?" he asked, in a piercing voice and with a wistful look. She made no answer, but on Shelley repeating the question, she said, "He cannot speak." "But surely," exclaimed Shelley, "he can if he will, for he is only a few weeks old! He may fancy perhaps that he cannot, but it is only a silly whim; he cannot have forgotten entirely the use of speech in so short a time; the thing is absolutely impossible." The woman, obviously taking him for a lunatic, replied mildly: "It is not for me to dispute with you gentlemen, but I can safely declare that I never heard him speak, nor any child, indeed, of his age." Shelley walked away with his friend, observing, with a deep sigh: "How provokingly close are these new-born babes!" One can, possibly, discover similar anecdotes in the lives of other men of genius and of men who fancied they had genius. But in such cases it is usually quite clear that the action was a jest or a piece of attitudinizing, or that the person who performed it was, as the vulgar say, "a little above

himself." In any event it almost invariably appears as an abnormal incident in the life of a normal man. Shelley's life, on the other hand, is largely a concentration of abnormal incidents. He was habitually "a bit above himself." In the above incident he was, no doubt, consciously behaving comically. But many of his serious actions were quite as comically extraordinary.

Godwin is related to have said that "Shelley was so beautiful, it was a pity he was so wicked." I doubt if there is a single literate person in the world to-day who would apply the word "wicked" to Shelley. It is said that Browning, who had begun as so ardent a worshipper, never felt the same regard for Shelley after reading the full story of his desertion of Harriet Westbrook and her suicide. But Browning did not know the full story. None of us knows the full story. On the face of it, it looks a peculiarly atrocious thing to desert a wife at a time when she is about to become a mother. It seems ungenerous, again, when a man has an income of £1,000 a year to make an annual allowance of only £200 to a deserted wife and her two children. Shelley, however, had not married Harriet for love. A nineteen-year-old boy, he had run away with a seventeen-year-old girl in order to save her from the imagined tyranny of her father. At the

end of three years Harriet had lost interest in him. Besides this, she had an intolerable elder sister whom Shelley hated. Harriet's sister, it is suggested, influenced her in the direction of a taste for bonnet-shops instead of supporting Shelley's exhortations to her that she should cultivate her mind. "Harriet," says Mr. Ingpen in *Shelley in England*, "foolishly allowed herself to be influenced by her sister, under whose advice she probably acted when, some months earlier, she prevailed upon Shelley to provide her with a carriage, silver plate and expensive clothes." We cannot help sympathizing a little with Harriet. At the same time, she was making a breach with Shelley inevitable. She wished him to remain her husband and to pay for her bonnets, but she did not wish even to pretend to "live up to him" any longer. As Mr. Ingpen says, "it was love, not matrimony," for which Shelley yearned. "Marriage," Shelley had once written, echoing Godwin, "is hateful, detestable. A kind of ineffable, sickening disgust seizes my mind when I think of this most despotic, most unrequired fetter which prejudice has forged to confine its energies." Having lived for years in a theory of "anti-matrimonialism," he now saw himself doomed to one of those conventional marriages which had always seemed to him a denial

of the holy spirit of love. This, too, at a time when he had found in Mary Godwin a woman belonging to the same intellectual and spiritual race as himself—a woman whom he loved as the great lovers in all the centuries have loved. Shelley himself expressed the situation in a few characteristic words to Thomas Love Peacock: "Everyone who knows me," he said, "must know that the partner of my life should be one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy. Harriet is a noble animal, but she can do neither." "It always appeared to me," said Peacock, "that you were very fond of Harriet." Shelley replied: "But you did not know how I hated her sister." And so Harriet's marriage-lines were torn up, as people say nowadays, like a scrap of paper. That Shelley did not feel he had done anything inconsiderate is shown by the fact that, within three weeks of his elopement with Mary Godwin, he was writing to Harriet, describing the scenery through which Mary and he had travelled, and urging her to come and live near them in Switzerland. "I write," his letter runs—

to urge you to come to Switzerland, where you will at least find one firm and constant friend, to whom your interests will be always dear—by whom your feelings will never wilfully be injured. From none can you expect this but me—all else are unfeeling, or selfish, or have beloved friends

of their own, as Mrs. B[oinville], to whom their attention and affection is confined.

He signed this letter (the Ianthe of whom he speaks was his daughter) :

With love to my sweet little Ianthe, ever most affectionately yours, S.

This letter, if it had been written by an amorist, would seem either base or priggish. Coming from Shelley, it is a miracle of what can only be called innocence.

The most interesting of the "new facts and letters" in Mr. Ingpen's book relate to Shelley's expulsion from Oxford and his runaway match with Harriet, and to his father's attitude on both these occasions. Shelley's father, backed by the family solicitor, cuts a commonplace figure in the story. He is simply the conventional grieved parent. He made no effort to understand his son. The most he did was to try to save his respectability. He objected to Shelley's studying for the Bar, but was anxious to make him a Member of Parliament ; and Shelley and he dined with the Duke of Norfolk to discuss the matter, the result being that the younger man was highly indignant "at what he considered an effort to shackle his mind, and intro-

duce him into life as a mere follower of the Duke." How unpromising as a party politician Shelley was may be gathered from the fact that in 1811, the same year in which he dined with the Duke, he not only wrote a satire on the Regent *à propos* of a Carlton House fête, but "amused himself with throwing copies into the carriages of persons going to Carlton House after the fête." Shelley's methods of propaganda were on other occasions also more eccentric than is usual with followers of dukes. His journey to Dublin to preach Catholic Emancipation and repeal of the Union was the beginning of a brief but extraordinary period of propaganda by pamphlet. Having written a fivepenny pamphlet, *An Address to the Irish People*, he stood in the balcony of his lodgings in Lower Sackville Street, and threw copies to the passers-by. "I stand," he wrote at the time, "at the balcony of our window, and watch till I see a man *who looks likely*; I throw a book to him." Harriet, it is to be feared, saw only the comic side of the adventure. Writing to Elizabeth Hitchener—"the Brown Demon," as Shelley called her when he came to hate her—she said :

I'm sure you would laugh were you to see us give the pamphlets. We throw them out of the window, and give them to men that we pass in the streets. For myself, I am ready to die of laughter when it is done, and Percy looks so grave. Yesterday he put one into a woman's hood and

cloak. She knew nothing of it, and we passed her. I could hardly get on : my muscles were so irritated.

Shelley, none the less, was in regard to Ireland a wiser politician than the politicians, and he was indulging in no turgid or fanciful prose in his *Address* when he described the Act of Union as "the most successful engine that England ever wielded over the misery of fallen Ireland." Godwin, with whom Shelley had been corresponding for some time, now became alarmed at his disciple's reckless daring. "Shelley, you are preparing a scene of blood!" he wrote to him in his anxiety. It is evidence of the extent of Godwin's influence over Shelley that the latter withdrew his Irish publications and returned to England, having spent about six weeks on his mission to the Irish people.

Mr. Ingpen has really written a new biography of Shelley rather than a compilation of new material. The new documents incorporated in the book were discovered by the successors to Mr. William Whitton, the Shelleys' family solicitor, but they can hardly be said to add much to our knowledge of the facts about Shelley. They prove, however, that his marriage to Harriet Westbrook took place in a Presbyterian church in Edinburgh, and that, at a later period, he was twice arrested for debt. Mr. Ingpen holds that they also prove that

Shelley "appeared on the boards of the Windsor Theatre as an actor in Shakespearean drama." But we have only William Whitton, the solicitor's, word for this, and it is clear that he had been at no pains to investigate the matter. "It was mentioned to me yesterday," he wrote to Shelley's father in November, 1815, "that Mr. P. B. Shelley was exhibiting himself on the Windsor stage in the character of Shakespeare's plays, under the figured name of Cooks." "The character of Shakespeare's plays" sounds oddly, as though Whitton did not know what he was talking about, unless he was referring to allegorical "tableaux vivants" of some sort. Certainly, so vague a rumour as this—the sort of rumour that would naturally arise in regard to a young man who was supposed to have gone to the bad—is no trustworthy evidence that Shelley was ever "an actor in Shakespearean drama." At the same time, Mr. Ingpen deserves enthusiastic praise for the untiring pursuit of facts which has enabled him to add an indispensable book to the Shelley library. I wish that, as he has to some extent followed the events of Shelley's life until the end, he had filled in the details of the life abroad as well as the life in England. His book is an absorbing biography, but it remains of set-purpose a biography with gaps. He writes, it should be

added, in the spirit of a collector of facts rather than of a psychologist. One has to create one's own portrait of Shelley out of the facts he has brought together.

One is surprised, by the way, to find so devoted a student of Shelley—a student to whom every lover of literature is indebted for his edition of Shelley's letters as well as for the biography—referring to Shelley again and again as "Bysshe." Shelley's family, it may be admitted, called him "Bysshe." But never was a more inappropriate name given to a poet who brought down music from heaven. At the same time, as we read his biography over again, we feel that it is possible that the two names do somehow express two incongruous aspects of the man. In his life he was, to a great extent, Bysshe ; in his poetry he was Shelley. Shelley wrote *The Skylark* and *Pan* and *The West Wind*. It was Bysshe who imagined that a fat old woman in a train had infected him with incurable elephantiasis. Mr. Ingpen quotes Peacock's account of this characteristic illusion :

He was continually on the watch for its symptoms ; his legs were to swell to the size of an elephant's, and his skin was to be crumpled over like goose-skin. He would draw the skin of his own hands, arms, and neck very tight, and, if he discovered any deviation from smoothness, he would seize the person next to him and endeavour, by a correspond-

ing pressure, to see if any corresponding deviation existed. He often startled young ladies in an evening party by this singular process, which was as instantaneous as a flash of lightning.

Mr. Ingpen has wisely omitted nothing about Bysshe, however ludicrous. After reading a biography so unsparing in tragi-comic narrative, however, one has to read *Prometheus* again in order to recall that divine song of a freed spirit, the incarnation of which we call Shelley.

(2) THE EXPERIMENTALIST

Mr. Buxton Forman has an original way of recommending books to our notice. In an Introduction to Medwin's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* he begins by frankly telling us that it is a bad book, and that the only point of controversy in regard to it is as to the kind of bad book it is. "Last century," he declares, "produced a plethora of bad books that were valuable, and of fairly good books with no lasting value. Medwin's distinction is that he left two bad books which were and still are valuable, but whether the *Byron Conversations* and the *Life of Shelley* should be called the two most valuable books of the last century or the two worst

valuable books of the century is a hard point in casuistry." Medwin, we may admit, even if he was not the "perfect idiot" he has been called, would have been a dull fellow enough if he had never met Shelley or Byron. But he did meet them, and as a result he will live to all eternity, or near it, a little gilded by their rays. He was not, Mr. Forman contends, the original of the man who "saw Shelley plain" in Browning's lyric. None the less, he is precisely that man in the imaginations of most of us. A relative of Shelley, a school friend, an intimate of the last years in Italy, even though we know him to have been one of those men who cannot help lying because they are so stupid, he still fascinates us as a treasury of sidelights on one of the strangest and most iridescent lives in the history of English literature.

Shelley is often presented to us as a kind of creature from fairyland, continually wounded in a struggle with the despotic realities of earth. Here and in his poetry, however, we see him rather as the herald of the age of science: he was a born experimentalist; he experimented, not only in chemistry, but in life and in politics. At school, he and his solar microscope were inseparable. Ardently interested in chemistry, he once, we are told, borrowed a book on the subject from Medwin's father, but

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his own father sent it back with a note saying : " I have returned the book on chemistry, as it is a forbidden thing at Eton." During his life at University College, Oxford, his delight in chemical experiments continued.

His chemical operations seemed to an unskilful observer to premise nothing but disasters. He had blown himself up at Eton. He had inadvertently swallowed some mineral poison, which he declared had seriously injured his health, and from the effects of which he should never recover. His hands, his clothes, his books, and his furniture, were stained and covered by medical acids—more than one hole in the carpet could elucidate the ultimate phenomena of combustion, especially in the middle of the room, where the floor had also been burnt by his mixing ether or some other fluid in a crucible, and the honourable wound was speedily enlarged by rents, for the philosopher, as he hastily crossed the room in pursuit of truth, was frequently caught in it by the foot.

The same eagerness of discovery is shown in his passion for kite-flying as a boy :

He was fond of flying kites, and at Field Place made an electrical one, an idea borrowed from Franklin, in order to draw lightning from the clouds—fire from Heaven, like a new Prometheus.

And his generous dream of bringing science to the service of humanity is revealed in his reflection :

What a comfort it would be to the poor at all times, and especially in winter, if we could be masters of caloric, and could at will furnish them with a constant supply !

Shelley's many-sided zeal in the pursuit of truth naturally led him early to invade theology. From his Eton days, he used to enter into controversies by letter with learned divines. Medwin declares that he saw one such correspondence in which Shelley engaged in argument with a bishop "under the assumed name of a woman." It must have been in a somewhat similar mood that "one Sunday, after we had been to Rowland Hill's chapel, and were dining together in the City, he wrote to him under an assumed name, proposing to preach to his congregation."

Certainly, Shelley loved mystification scarcely less than he loved truth itself. He was a romanticist as well as a philosopher, and the reading in his childhood of novels like *Zofloya the Moor*—a work as wild, apparently, as anything Cyril Tourneur ever wrote—excited his imagination to impossible flights of adventure. Few of us have the endurance to study the effects of this ghostly reading in Shelley's own work—his forgotten novels, *Zastrozzi*, and *St. Irvyne ; or the Rosicrucian*—but we can see how his life itself borrowed some of the extravagances of fiction. Many of his recorded adventures are supposed to have been hallucinations, as in the story of the "stranger in a military cloak" who, seeing him in a post-office at

Pisa, said, "What! Are you that d——d atheist, Shelley?" and felled him to the ground. On the other hand, Shelley's story of his being attacked by a midnight assassin in Wales, after being disbelieved for three-quarters of a century, has in recent years been corroborated in the most unexpected way. Wild a fiction as his life was in many respects, it was a fiction he himself sincerely and innocently believed. His imaginative appetite, having devoured science by day and sixpenny romances by night, still remained unsatisfied, and, quite probably, went on to mix up reality and make-believe past all recognition for its next dish. Francis Thompson, despite the protests of some critics, was right when he noted what a complete play-fellow Shelley was in his life. When he was in London after his expulsion from the University, he could throw himself with all his being into childish games like skimming stones on the Serpentine, "counting with the utmost glee the number of bounds, as the flat stones flew skimming over the surface of the water." He found a perfect pleasure in paper boats, and we hear of his making a sail on one occasion out of a ten-pound note—one of those myths, perhaps, which gather round poets. It must have been the innocence of pleasure shown in games like these that made him an irre-

able companion to so many comparatively prosaic people. For the idea that Shelley in private life was aloof and unpopular from his childhood up is an entirely false one. As Medwin points out, in referring to his school-days, he "must have had a rather large circle of friends, since his parting breakfast at Eton cost £50."

Even at the distance of a century, we are still seized by the fascination of that boyish figure with the "stag eyes," so enthusiastic in pursuit of truth and of dreams, of trifles light as air and of the redemption of the human race. "His figure," Hogg tells us, "was slight and fragile, and yet his bones were large and strong. He was tall, but he stooped so much that he seemed of low stature." And, in Medwin's book, we even become reconciled to that shrill voice of his, which Lamb and most other people found so unpleasant. Medwin gives us nothing in the nature of a portrait of Shelley in these heavy and incoherent pages; but he gives us invaluable materials for such a portrait—in descriptions, for instance, of how he used to go on with his reading, even when he was out walking, and would get so absorbed in his studies that he sometimes asked, "Mary, have I dined?" More important, as revealing his too exquisite sensitiveness, is the account of how Medwin saw him, "after

threading the carnival crowd in the Lung' Arno Corsos, throw himself, half-fainting, into a chair, overpowered by the atmosphere of evil passions, as he used to say, in that sensual and unintellectual crowd." Some people, on reading a passage like this, will rush to the conclusion that Shelley was a prig. But the prig is a man easily wounded by blows to his self-esteem, not by the miseries and imperfections of humanity. Shelley, no doubt, was more convinced of his own rightness than any other man of the same fine genius in English history. He did not indulge in repentance, like Burns and Byron. On the other hand, he was not in the smallest degree an egolater. He had not even such an innocent egoism as Thoreau's. He was always longing to give himself to the world. In the Italian days we find him planning an expedition with Byron to rescue, by main force, a man who was in danger of being burnt alive for sacrilege. He has often been denounced for his heartless treatment of Harriet Westbrook, and, though we may not judge him, it is possible that a better man would have behaved differently. But it was a mark of his unselfishness, at least, that he went through the marriage service with both his wives in spite of his principles, that he so long endured Harriet's sister as the tyrant of his house, and that he neg-

ected none of his responsibilities to her, in so far as they were consistent with his deserting her for another woman. This may seem a *bizarre* defence, but I merely wish to emphasize the fact that Shelley behaved far better than ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have behaved, given the same principles and the same circumstances. He was a man who never followed the line of least resistance or of self-indulgence, as most men do in their love affairs. He fought a difficult fight all his life in a world that ignored him, except when it was denouncing him as a polluter of Society. Whatever mistakes we may consider him to have made, we can hardly fail to admit that he was one of the greatest of English Puritans.

(3) THE POET OF HOPE

Shelley is the poet for a revolutionary age. He is the poet of hope, as Wordsworth is the poet of wisdom. He has been charged with being intangible and unearthly, but he is so only in the sense in which the future is intangible and unearthly. He is no more unearthly than the skylark or the rainbow or the dawn. His world, indeed, is a universe of

Shelley's politics from his poetry. But Shelley's politics are part of his poetry. They are the politics of hope as his poetry is the poetry of hope. Europe did not adopt his politics in the generation that followed the Napoleonic Wars, and as a result we have had an infinitely more terrible war a hundred years later. Every generation rejects Shelley; it prefers incredulity to hope, fear to joy, obedience to common sense, and is surprised when the logic of its common sense turns out to be a tragedy such as even the wildest orgy of idealism could not have produced. Shelley must, no doubt, still seem a shocking poet to an age in which the limitation of the veto of the House of Lords was described as a revolutionary step. To Shelley even the new earth for which the Bolsheviks are calling would not have seemed an extravagant demand. He was almost the only English poet up to his own time who believed that the world had a future. One can think of no other poet to whom to turn for the prophetic music of a real League of Nations. Tennyson may have spoken of the federation of the world, but his passion was not for that but for the British Empire. He had the craven fear of being great on any but the old Imperialist lines. His work did nothing to make his country more generous than it was before. Shelley, on the other hand,

creates for us a new atmosphere of generosity. His patriotism was love of the people of England, not love of the Government of England. Hence, when the Government of England allied itself with the oppressors of mankind, he saw nothing unpatriotic in arraigning it as he would have arraigned a German or a Russian Government in the same circumstances.

He arraigned it, indeed, in the preface to *Hellas* in a paragraph which the publisher nervously suppressed, and which was only restored in 1892 by Mr. Buxton Forman. The seditious paragraph ran :

Should the English people ever become free, they will reflect upon the part which those who presume to represent them will have played in the great drama of the revival of liberty, with feelings which it would become them to anticipate. This is the age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors, and every one of those ringleaders of the privileged gangs of murderers and swindlers, called Sovereigns, look to each other for aid against the common enemy, and suspend their mutual jealousies in the presence of a mightier fear. Of this holy alliance all the despots of the earth are virtual members. But a new race has arisen throughout Europe, nursed in the abhorrence of the opinions which are its chains, and she will continue to produce fresh generations to accomplish that destiny which tyrants foresee and dread.

It is nearly a hundred years since Shelley proclaimed this birth of a new race throughout Europe.

Would he have turned pessimist if he had lived to see the world infected with Prussianism as it has been in our time? I do not think he would. He would have been the singer of the new race to-day as he was then. To him the resurrection of the old despotism, foreign and domestic, would have seemed but a fresh assault by the Furies on the body of Prometheus. He would have scattered the Furies with a song.

For Shelley has not failed. He is one of those who have brought down to earth the creative spirit of freedom. And that spirit has never ceased to brood, with however disappointing results, over the chaos of Europe until our own time. His greatest service to freedom is, perhaps, that he made it seem, not a policy, but a part of Nature. He made it desirable as the spring, lovely as a cloud in a blue sky, gay as a lark, glad as a wave, golden as a star, mighty as a wind. Other poets speak of freedom, and invite the birds on to the platform. Shelley spoke of freedom and himself became a bird in the air, a wave of the sea. He did not humiliate beauty into a lesson. He scattered beauty among men not as a homily but as a spirit—

Singing hymns unbidden, till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not.

His politics are implicit in *The Cloud* and *The Sky-*

lark and *The West Wind*, no less than in *The Mask of Anarchy*. His idea of the State as well as his idea of sky and stream and forest was rooted in the exuberant imagination of a lover. The whole body of his work, whether lyrical in the strictest sense or propagandist, is a Book of Revelation.

It is impossible to say whether he might not have been a greater poet if he had not been in such haste to rebuild the world. He would, one fancies, have been a better artist if he had had a finer patience of phrase. On the other hand, his achievement even in the sphere of phrase and music is surpassed by no poet since Shakespeare. He may hurry along at intervals in a cloud of second-best words, but out of the cloud suddenly comes a song like Ariel's and a radiance like the radiance of a new day. With him a poem is a melody rather than a manuscript. Not since Prospero commanded songs from his attendant spirits has there been singing heard like the *Hymn of Pan* and *The Indian Serenade*. *The Cloud* is the most magical transmutation of things seen into things heard in the English language. Not that Shelley misses the wonder of things seen. But he apprehends things, as it were, musically.

My soul is an enchanted boat
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing.

character in that final phrase, "an archangel a little damaged." This was said at a time when the archangel was much more than a little damaged by the habit of laudanum; but even then Lamb wrote: "His face, when he repeats his verses, hath its ancient glory." Most of Coleridge's great contemporaries were aware of that glory. Even those who were afterwards to be counted among his revilers, such as Hazlitt and De Quincey, had known what it was to be disciples at the feet of this inspired ruin. They spoke not only of his mind, but even of his physical characteristics—his voice and his hair—as though these belonged to the one man of his time whose food was ambrosia. Even as a boy at Christ's Hospital, according to Lamb, he used to make the "casual passer through the Cloisters stand still, intranced with admiration (while he weighed the disproportion between the *speech* and the *garb* of the young *Mirandola*), to hear thee unfold, in thy deep and sweet intonations, the mysteries of *Iamblichus*, or *Plotinus* . . . or reciting *Homer* in the Greek, or *Pindar*—while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the *inspired charity-boy!*"

It is exceedingly important that, as we read Coleridge, we should constantly remember what an archangel he was in the eyes of his contem-

poraries. *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan* we could read, no doubt, in perfect enjoyment even if we did not know the author's name. For the rest, there is so much flagging of wing both in his verse and in his prose that, if we did not remind ourselves what flights he was born to take, we might persuade ourselves at times that there was little in his work but the dull flappings and slitherings of a penguin. His genius is intermittent and comes arbitrarily to an end. He is inspired only in fragments and aphorisms. He was all but incapable of writing a complete book or a complete poem at a high level. His irresponsibility as an author is described in that sentence in which he says : " I have laid too many eggs in the hot sands of this wilderness, the world, with ostrich carelessness and ostrich oblivion." His literary plans had a ludicrous way of breaking down. It was characteristic of him that, in 1817, when he projected a complete edition of his poems, under the title *Sibylline Leaves*, he omitted to publish Volume I. and published only Volume II. He would announce a lecture on Milton, and then give his audience " a very eloquent and popular discourse on the general character of Shakespeare." His two finest poems he never finished. He wrote not by an act of the will but according to the wind, and when the wind dropped he came to earth. It

was as though he could soar but was unable to fly. It is this that differentiates him from other great poets and critics. None of them has left such a record of unfulfilled purposes. It is not that he did not get through an enormous amount of work, but that, like the revellers in Mr. Chesterton's poem, he "went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head," and in the end he did not get to Birmingham. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch gives an amusing account of the way in which *Biographia Literaria* came to be written. Originally, in 1815, it was conceived as a preface—to be "done in two, or at farthest three days"—to a collection of some "scattered and manuscript poems." Two months later the plan had changed. Coleridge was now busy on a preface to an *Autobiographia Literaria, sketches of my literary Life and Opinions*. This in turn developed into "a full account (*raisonné*) of the controversy concerning Wordsworth's poems and theory," with a "disquisition on the powers of Association . . . and on the generic difference between the Fancy and the Imagination." This ran to such a length that he decided not to use it as a preface, but to amplify it into a work in three volumes. He succeeded in writing the first volume, but he found himself unable to fill the second. "Then, as the volume obstinately remained too small, he tossed in *Satyrane*,

an epistolary account of his wanderings in Germany, topped up with a critique of a bad play, and gave the whole painfully to the world in July, 1817." It is one of the ironies of literary history that Coleridge, the censor of the incongruous in literature, the vindicator of the formal purpose as opposed to the haphazard inspiration of the greatest of writers, a missionary of the "shaping imagination," should himself have given us in his greatest book of criticism an incongruous, haphazard, and shapeless jumble. It is but another proof of the fact that, while talent cannot safely ignore what is called technique, genius almost can. Coleridge, in spite of his formlessness, remains the wisest man who ever spoke in English about literature. His place is that of an oracle among controversialists.

Even so, *Biographia Literaria* is a disappointing book. It is the porch, but it is not the temple. It may be that, in literary criticism, there can be no temple. Literary criticism is in its nature largely an incitement to enter, a hint of the treasures that are to be found within. Persons who seek rest in literary orthodoxy are always hoping to discover written upon the walls of the porch the ten commandments of good writing. It is extremely easy to invent ten such commandments—it was done in the age of Racine and in the age of Pope—but the wise

critic knows that in literature the rules are less important than the "inner light." Hence, criticism at its highest is not a theorist's attempt to impose iron laws on writers: it is an attempt to capture the secret of that "inner light" and of those who possess it and to communicate it to others. It is also an attempt to define the conditions in which the "inner light" has most happily manifested itself, and to judge new writers of promise according to the measure in which they have been true to the spirit, though not necessarily to the technicalities, of the great tradition. Criticism, then, is not the Roman father of good writing: it is the disciple and missionary of good writing. The end of criticism is less law-giving than conversion. It teaches not the legalities, but the love, of literature. *Biographia Literaria* does this in its most admirable parts by interesting us in Coleridge's own literary beginnings, by emphasizing the strong sweetness of great poets in contrast to the petty animosities of little ones, by pointing out the signs of the miracle of genius in the young Shakespeare, and by disengaging the true genius of Wordsworth from a hundred extravagances of theory and practice. Coleridge's remarks on the irritability of minor poets—"men of undoubted talents, but not of genius," whose tempers are "rendered yet more

irritable by their desire to *appear* men of genius"—should be written up on the study walls of everyone commencing author. His description, too, of his period as "this age of personality, this age of literary and political gossiping, when the meanest insects are worshipped with a sort of Egyptian superstition, if only the brainless head be atoned for by the sting of personal malignity in the tail," conveys a warning to writers that is not of an age but for all time. Coleridge may have exaggerated the "manly hilarity" and "evenness and sweetness of temper" of men of genius. But there is no denying that, the smaller the genius, the greater is the spite of wounded self-love. "Experience informs us," as Coleridge says, "that the first defence of weak minds is to recriminate." As for Coleridge's great service to Wordsworth's fame, it was that of a gold-washer. He cleansed it from all that was false in Wordsworth's reaction both in theory and in practice against "poetic diction." Coleridge pointed out that Wordsworth had misunderstood the ultimate objections to eighteenth-century verse. The valid objection to a great deal of eighteenth-century verse was not, he showed, that it was written in language different from that of prose, but that it consisted of "translations of prose thoughts into poetic language." Coleridge put it

still more strongly, indeed, when he said that "the language from Pope's translation of Homer to Darwin's *Temple of Nature* may, notwithstanding some illustrious exceptions, be too faithfully characterized as claiming to be poetical for no better reason than that it would be intolerable in conversation or in prose." Wordsworth, unfortunately, in protesting against the meretricious garb of mean thoughts, wished to deny verse its more splendid clothing altogether. If we accepted his theories we should have to condemn his *Ode*, the greatest of his sonnets, and, as Coleridge put it, "two-thirds at least of the marked beauties of his poetry." The truth is, Wordsworth created an engine that was in danger of destroying not only Pope but himself. Coleridge destroyed the engine and so helped to save Wordsworth. Coleridge may, in his turn, have gone too far in dividing language into three groups—language peculiar to poetry, language peculiar to prose, and language common to both, though there is much to be said for the division; but his jealousy for the great tradition in language was the jealousy of a sound critic. "Language," he declared, "is the armoury of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests."

He, himself, wrote idly enough at times : he did not shrink from the phrase, "literary man," abominated by Mr. Birrell. But he rises in sentence after sentence into the great manner, as when he declares :

No man was ever yet a great poet without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language.

How excellently, again, he describes Wordsworth's early aim as being—

to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.

He explains Wordsworth's gift more fully in another passage :

It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought, the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed, and, above all, the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world, around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew-drops.

Coleridge's censures on Wordsworth, on the other

hand, such as that on *The Daffodil*, may not all be endorsed by us to-day. But in the mass they have the insight of genius, as when he condemns "the approximation to what might be called *mental* bombast, as distinguished from verbal." His quotations of great passages, again, are the very flower of good criticism.

Mr. George Sampson's editorial selection from *Biographia Literaria* and his pleasant as well as instructive notes give one a new pleasure in re-reading this classic of critical literature. The "quale-quare-quidditive" chapters have been removed, and Wordsworth's revolutionary prefaces and essays given in their place. In its new form, *Biographia Literaria* may not be the best book that could be written, but there is good reason for believing that it is the best book that has been written on poetry in the English tongue.

(2) COLERIDGE AS A TALKER

Coleridge's talk resembles the movements of one of the heavenly bodies. It moves luminously on its way without impediment, without conflict. When Dr. Johnson talks, half our pleasure is due to our sense of conflict. His sentences are knobby sticks.

We love him as a good man playing the bully even more than as a wise man talking common sense. He is one of the comic characters in literature. He belongs, in his eloquence, to the same company as Falstaff and Micawber. He was, to some extent, the invention of a Scottish humorist named Boswell. "Burke," we read in Coleridge's *Table Talk*, "said and wrote more than once that he thought Johnson greater in talking than writing, and greater in Boswell than in real life." Coleridge's conversation is not to the same extent a coloured expression of personality. He speaks out of the solitude of an oracle rather than struts upon the stage of good company, a master of repartees. At his best, he becomes the mouthpiece of universal wisdom, as when he says : " To most men experience is like the stern lights of a ship, which illuminate only the track it has passed." He can give us in a sentence the central truth of politics, reconciling what is good in Individualism with what is good in Socialism in a score or so of words :

That is the most excellent state of society in which the patriotism of the citizen ennobles, but does not merge, the individual energy of the man.

And he can give common sense as well as wisdom imaginative form, as in the sentence :

Truth is a good dog ; but beware of barking too close to the heels of Error, lest you get your brains knocked out.

“ I am, by the law of my nature, a reasoner,” said Coleridge, and he explained that he did not mean by this “ an arguer.” He was a discoverer of order, of laws, of causes, not a controversialist. He sought after principles, whether in politics or literature. He quarrelled with Gibbon because his *Decline and Fall* was “ little else but a disguised collection of . . . splendid anecdotes ” instead of a philosophic search for the ultimate causes of the ruin of the Roman Empire. Coleridge himself formulated these causes in sentences that are worth remembering at a time when we are debating whether the world of the future is to be a vast boxing ring of empires or a community of independent nations. He said :

The true key to the declension of the Roman Empire—which is not to be found in all Gibbon’s immense work—may be stated in two words : the imperial character over-laying, and finally destroying, the *national* character. Rome under Trajan was an empire without a nation.

One must not claim too much for Coleridge, however. He was a seer with his head among the stars, but he was also a human being with uneven gait, stumbling amid infirmities, prejudices, and

unhappinesses. He himself boasted in a delightful sentence :

For one mercy I owe thanks beyond all utterance—that, with all my gastric and bowel distempers, my head hath ever been like the head of a mountain in blue air and sunshine.

It is to be feared that Coleridge's "gastric and bowel distempers" had more effect on his head than he was aware of. Like other men, he often spoke out of a heart full of grievances. He uttered the bitterness of an unhappily married dyspeptic when he said : "The most happy marriage I can picture or image to myself would be the union of a deaf man to a blind woman." It is amusing to recall that one of the many books which he wished to write was "a book on the duties of women, more especially to their husbands." One feels, again, that in his defence of the egoism of the great reformers, he was apologizing for a vice of his own rather than making an impersonal statement of truth. "How can a tall man help thinking of his size," he asked, "when dwarfs are constantly standing on tiptoe beside him ?" The personal note that occasionally breaks in upon the oracular rhythm of the *Table Talk*, however, is a virtue in literature, even if a lapse in philosophy. The crumbs of a great man's autobiography are no less precious than the

crumbs of his wisdom. There are moods in which one prefers his egotism to his great thoughts. It is pleasant to hear Coleridge boasting : "*The Ancient Mariner* cannot be imitated, nor the poem *Love*. *They may be excelled ; they are not imitable.*" One is amused to know that he succeeded in offending Lamb on one occasion by illustrating " the cases of vast genius in proportion to talent and the predominance of talent in conjunction with genius in the persons of Lamb and himself." It is amusing, too, to find that, while Wordsworth regarded *The Ancient Mariner* as a dangerous drag on the popularity of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge looked on his poem as the feature that had sold the greatest number of the copies of the book. It is only fair to add that in taking this view he spoke not self-complacently, but humorously :

I was told by Longmans that the greater part of the *Lyrical Ballads* had been sold to seafaring men, who, having heard of the *Ancient Mariner*, concluded that it was a naval song-book, or, at all events, that it had some relation to nautical matters.

Of autobiographical confessions there are not so many in *Table Talk* as one would like. At the same time, there are one or two which throw light on the nature of Coleridge's imagination. We get an idea of one of the chief differences between the

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poetry of Coleridge and the poetry of Wordsworth
when we read the confession :

I have the perception of individual images very strong, but a dim one of the relation of place. I remember the man or the tree, but where I saw them I mostly forget.

The nephew who collected Coleridge's talk declared that there was no man whom he would more readily have chosen as a guide in morals, but "I would not take him as a guide through streets or fields or earthly roads." The author of *Kubla Khan* asserted still more strongly on another occasion his indifference to locality :

. Dear Sir Walter Scott and myself were exact but harmonious opposites in this—that every old ruin, hill, river, or tree called up in his mind a host of historical or biographical associations, just as a bright pan of brass, when beaten, is said to attract the swarming bees; whereas, for myself, notwithstanding Dr. Johnson, I believe I should walk over the plain of Marathon without taking more interest in it than in any other plain of similar features. Yet I receive as much pleasure in reading the account of the battle, in Herodotus, as anyone can. Charles Lamb wrote an essay on a man who lived in past time : I thought of adding another to it on one who lived not *in time* at all, past, present, or future—but beside or collaterally.

Some of Coleridge's other memories are of a more trifling and amusing sort. He recalls, for instance, the occasion of his only flogging at school. He had

gone to a shoemaker and asked to be taken on as an apprentice. The shoemaker, "being an honest man," had at once told the boy's master:

Bowyer asked me why I had made myself such a fool? to which I answered, that I had a great desire to be a shoemaker, and that I hated the thought of being a clergyman. "Why so?" said he. "Because, to tell you the truth, sir," said I, "I am an infidel!" For this, without more ado, Bowyer flogged me—wisely, as I think—soundly, as I know. Any whining or sermonizing would have gratified my vanity, and confirmed me in my absurdity; as it was, I laughed at, and got heartily ashamed of, my folly.

Among the reminiscences of Coleridge no passage is more famous than that in which he relates how, as he was walking in a lane near Highgate one day, a "loose, slack, not well-dressed youth" was introduced to him:

It was Keats. He was introduced to me, and stayed a minute or so. After he had left us a little way, he came back, and said: "Let me carry away the memory, Coleridge, of having pressed your hand!" "There is death in that hand," I said to —, when Keats was gone; yet this was, I believe, before the consumption showed itself distinctly.

Another famous anecdote relates to the time at which Coleridge, like Wordsworth, carried the fires of the French Revolution about him into the peace of the West Country. Speaking of a fellow-disciple

of the liberty of those days, Coleridge afterwards said :

John Thelwall had something very good about him. We were once sitting in a beautiful recess in the Quantocks, when I said to him : " Citizen John, this is a fine place to talk treason in ! " " Nay ! Citizen Samuel," replied he, " it is rather a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason ! "

Is there any prettier anecdote in literary history ?

Besides the impersonal wisdom and the personal anecdotes of the *Table Talk*, however, there are a great number of opinions which show us Coleridge not as a seer, but as a " character "—a crusty gentleman, every whit as ready to express an antipathy as a principle. He shared Dr. Johnson's quarrel with the Scots, and said of them:

I have generally found a Scotchman with a little literature very disagreeable. He is a superficial German or a dull Frenchman. The Scotch will attribute merit to people of any nation rather than the English.

He had no love for Jews, or Dissenters, or Catholics, and anticipated Carlyle's hostility to the emancipation of the negroes. He raged against the Reform Bill, Catholic Emancipation, and the education of the poor in schools. He was indignant with Belgium for claiming national independence. One

cannot read much of his talk about politics without amazement that so wise a man should have been so frequently a fool. At the same time, he generally remained an original fool. He never degenerated into a mere partisan. He might be deceived by reactionary ideals, but he was not taken in by reactionary leaders. He was no more capable than Shelley of mistaking Castlereagh for a great man, and he did not join in the glorification of Pitt. Like Dr. Johnson, he could be a Tory without feeling that it was necessary at all costs to bully Ireland. Coleridge, indeed, went so far as to wish to cut the last link with Ireland as the only means of saving England. Discussing the Irish question, he said :

I am quite sure that no dangers are to be feared by England from the disannexing and independence of Ireland at all comparable with the evils which have been, and will yet be, caused to England by the Union. We have never received one particle of advantage from our association with Ireland. . . . Mr. Pitt has received great credit for effecting the Union ; but I believe it will sooner or later be discovered that the manner in which, and the terms upon which, he effected it made it the most fatal blow that ever was levelled against the peace and prosperity of England. From it came the Catholic Bill. From the Catholic Bill has come this Reform Bill ! And what next ?

When one thinks of the injury that the subjection of Ireland has done the English name in America,

in Russia, in Australia, and elsewhere in quite recent times, one can hardly deny that Coleridge was a sound prophet, though for other reasons than he thought.

It is the literary rather than the political opinions, however, that will bring every generation of readers afresh to Coleridge's *Table Talk*. No man ever talked better in a few sentences on Shakespeare, Sterne, and the tribe of authors. One may not agree with Coleridge in regarding Jeremy Taylor as one of the four chief glories of English literature, or in thinking Southey's style "next door to faultless." But one listens to his *obiter dicta* eagerly as the sayings of one of the greatest minds that have interested themselves in the criticism of literature. There are tedious pages in *Table Talk*, but these are, for the most part, concerned with theology. On the whole, the speech of Coleridge was golden. Even the leaden parts are interesting because they are Coleridge's lead. One wishes the theology was balanced, however, by a few more glimpses of his lighter interests, such as we find in the passage: "Never take an iambus for a Christian name. A trochee, or tribrach, will do very well. Edith and Rotha are my favourite names for women." What we want most of all in table talk is to get an author into the confession album. Coleridge's

Table Talk would have stood a worse chance of immortality were it not for the fact that he occasionally came down out of the pulpit and babbled.

XII.—THE POLITICS OF SWIFT AND SHAKESPEARE

(I) SWIFT

THERE are few greater ironies in history than that the modern Conservatives should be eager to claim Swift as one of themselves. One finds even the *Morning Post*—which someone has aptly enough named the *Morning Pogrom*—cheerfully counting the author of *A Voyage to Houyhbnms* in the list of sound Tories. It is undeniable that Swift wrote pamphlets for the Tory Party of his day. A Whig, he turned from the Whigs of Queen Anne in disgust, and carried the Tory label for the rest of his life. If we consider realities rather than labels, however, what do we find were the chief political ideals for which Swift stood? His politics, as every reader of his pamphlets knows, were, above all, the politics of a pacifist and a Nationalist—the two things most abhorrent to the orthodox Tories of our own time. Swift belonged to the Tory Party at one of those rare periods at

which it was a peace party. *The Conduct of the Allies* was simply a demand for a premature peace. Worse than this, it was a pamphlet against England's taking part in a land-war on the Continent instead of confining herself to naval operations. "It was the kingdom's misfortune," wrote Swift, "that the sea was not the Duke of Marlborough's element, otherwise the whole force of the war would infallibly have been bestowed there, infinitely to the advantage of his country." Whether Swift and the Tories were right in their attack on Marlborough and the war is a question into which I do not propose to enter. I merely wish to emphasize the fact that *The Conduct of the Allies* was, from the modern Tory point of view, not merely a pacifist, but a treasonable, document. Had anything like it appeared in our time, it would have been in danger from the Defence of the Realm Act. And that Swift was a hater of war, not merely as a party politician, but as a philosopher, is shown by the discourse on the causes of war which he puts into the mouth of Gulliver when the latter is trying to convey a picture of human society to his Houyhnhnm master :

Sometimes the quarrel between two princes is to decide which of them shall dispossess a third of his dominions, where neither of them pretends to any right. Sometimes

one prince quarrelleth with another for fear the other should quarrel with him. Sometimes a war is entered upon because the enemy is too strong, and sometimes because he is too weak. Sometimes our neighbours want the things which we have, or have the things which we want ; and we both fight till they take ours or give us theirs. It is a very justifiable cause of a war to invade a country after the people have been wasted by famine, destroyed by pestilence or embroiled by factions among themselves. It is justifiable to enter into war with our nearest ally, when one of his towns lies convenient for us, or a territory of land that would render our dominions round and complete. If a prince sends forces into a nation, where the people are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to death or make slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barbarous way of living.

There you have " Kultur " wars, and " white man's burden " wars, and wars for " places of strategic importance," satirized as though by a twentieth-century humanitarian. When the *Morning Post* begins to write leaders in the same strain, we shall begin to believe that Swift was a Tory in the ordinary meaning of the word.

As for Swift's Irish politics, Mr. Charles Whibley, like other Conservative writers, attempts to gloss over their essential Nationalism by suggesting that Swift was merely a just man righteously indignant at the destruction of Irish manufactures. At least, one would never gather from his recent book that Swift was in a real sense the founder of the Irish demand for self-government. Swift was an

Irish patriot in the sense in which Washington was an American patriot. Like Washington, he had no quarrel with English civilization. He was not an eighteenth-century Sinn Féiner. He regarded himself as a colonist, and his Nationalism was Colonial Nationalism. As such he was the forerunner of Grattan and Flood, and also, in a measure, of Parnell and Redmond. While not a Separatist, he had the strongest possible objection to being either ruled or ruined from London. In his *Short View of the State of Ireland*, published in 1728, he preached the whole gospel of Colonial Nationalism as it is accepted by Irishmen like Sir Horace Plunkett to-day. He declared that one of the causes of a nation's thriving—

. . . is by being governed only by laws made with their own consent, for otherwise they are not a free people. And, therefore, all appeals for justice, or applications for favour or preferment, to another country are so many grievous impoverishments.

He said of the Irish :

We are in the condition of patients who have physic sent to them by doctors at a distance, strangers to their constitution and the nature of their disease.

In the *Drapier's Letters* he denied the right of the English Parliament to legislate for Ireland. He

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declared that all reason was on the side of Ireland's being free, though power and the love of power made for Ireland's servitude. "The arguments on both sides," he said in a passage which sums up with perfect irony the centuries-old controversy between England and Ireland, were "invincible":

For in reason all government without the consent of the governed is slavery. But, in fact, eleven men well armed will certainly subdue one single man in his shirt.

It would be interesting to know how the modern Tory, whose gospel is the gospel of the eleven men well armed, squares this with Swift's passionate championship of the "one single man in his shirt." One wishes very earnestly that the Toryism of Swift were in fact the Toryism of the modern Conservative party. Had it been so, there would have been no such thing as Carsonism in pre-war England; and, had there been no Carsonism, one may infer from Mr. Gerard's recent revelations, there might have been no European war.

Mr. Whibley, it is only fair to say, is concerned with Swift as a man of letters and a friend, rather than with Swift as a party politician. The book referred to is a reprint of the Leslie Stephen lecture which he delivered at Cambridge a few months ago. It was bound, therefore, to be predominantly

literary in interest. At the same time, Mr. Whibley's political bias appears both in what he says and in what he keeps silent about. His defence of Swift against the charge of misanthropy is a defence with which we find ourselves largely in agreement. But Mr. Whibley is too single-minded a party politician to be able to defend the Dean without clubbing a number of his own pet antipathies in the process. He seems to think that the only alternative to the attitude of Dean Swift towards humanity is the attitude of persons who, "feigning a bland and general love of abstract humanity . . . wreak a wild revenge upon individuals." He apparently believes that it is impossible for the same human being to wish well to the human race in general, and to be affectionate to John, Peter and Thomas in particular. Here are some of his rather wild comments on this topic. He writes :

We know well enough whither universal philanthropy leads us. The Friend of Man is seldom the friend of men. At his best he is content with a moral maxim, and buttons up his pocket in the presence of poverty. "*I give thee sixpence ! I will see thee damned first !*" It is not for nothing that Canning's immortal words were put in the mouth of the Friend of Humanity, who, finding that he cannot turn the Needy Knife Grinder to political account, gives him kicks for ha'pence, and goes off in "a transport of Republican enthusiasm." Such is the Friend of Man at his best.

"At his best" is good. It makes one realize that Mr. Whibley is merely playing a game of make-believe, and playing it very hard. His indictment of humanitarians has about as much, or as little, basis in fact as would an indictment of wives or seagulls or fields of corn. One has only to mention Shelley with his innumerable personal benevolences to set Mr. Whibley's card-castle of abuse tumbling.

With Mr. Whibley's general view of Swift as opposed to his general view of politics, I find myself for the most part in harmony. I doubt, however, whether Swift has been pursued in his grave with such torrential malignity as Mr. Whibley imagines. Thackeray's denigration, I admit, takes the breath away. One can hardly believe that Thackeray had read either Swift's writings or his life. We know that he had, but his passion for the sentimental graces made him incapable of doing justice to a genius of saturnine realism such as Swift's. The truth is, though Swift was among the staunchest of friends, he is not among the most sociable of authors. His writings are seldom in the vein either of tenderness or of merriment. We know of the tenderness of Swift only from a rare anecdote or from the prattle of the *Journal to Stella*. As for his laughter, as Mr. Whibley rightly points out, Pope was talking nonsense when he wrote of Swift as laughing

and shaking in Rabelais's easy chair. Swift's humour is essentially of the intellect. He laughs out of his own bitterness rather than to amuse his fellowmen. As Mr. Whibley says, he is not a cynic. He is not sufficiently indifferent for that. He is a satirist, a sort of perverted and suffering idealist : an idealist with the cynic's vision. It is the essential nobleness of Swift's nature which makes the *Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* a noble and not a disgusting piece of literature. There are people who pretend that this section of *Gulliver's Travels* is almost too terrible for sensitive persons to read. This is sheer affectation. It can only be honestly maintained by those who believe that life is too terrible for sensitive persons to live.

(2) SHAKESPEARE

Mr. Whibley goes through history like an electioneering bill-sticker. He plasters up his election-time shrillnesses not only on Fox's House of Commons but on Shakespeare's Theatre. He is apparently interested in men of genius chiefly as regards their attitude to his electioneering activities. Shakespeare, he seems to imagine, was the sort of person who would have asked for nothing better as a frieze

in his sitting-room in New Place than a scroll bearing in huge letters some such motto as "Vote for Curzon and Down with the Common People" or "Vote for Carson and No League of Nations." Mr. Whibley thinks Shakespeare was like that, and so he exalts Shakespeare. He has, I do not doubt, read Shakespeare, but that has made no difference. He would clearly have taken much the same view of Shakespeare if he had never read him. To be great, said Emerson, is to be misunderstood. To be great is assuredly to be misunderstood by Mr. Whibley.

I do not think it is doing an injustice to Mr. Whibley to single out the chapter on "Shakespeare: Patriot and Tory" as the most representative in his volume of *Political Portraits*. It would be unjust if one were to suggest that Mr. Whibley could write nothing better than this. His historical portraits are often delightful as the work of a clever illustrator, even if we cannot accept them as portraits. Those essays in which he keeps himself out of the picture and eschews ideas most successfully attract us as coming from the hand of a skilful writer. His studies of Clarendon, Metternich, Napoleon and Melbourne are all of them good entertainment. If I comment on the Shakespeare essay rather than on these, it is because here more

than anywhere else in the book the author's skill as a portrait-painter is put to the test. Here he has to depend almost exclusively on his imagination, intelligence, and knowledge of human nature. Here, where there are scarcely any epigrams or anecdotes to quote, a writer must reveal whether he is an artist and a critic, or a pedestrian intelligence with the trick of words. Mr. Whibley, I fear, comes badly off from the test. One does not blame him for having written on the theme that "Shakespeare, being a patriot, was a Tory also." It would be easy to conceive a scholarly and amusing study of Shakespeare on these lines. Whitman maintained that there is much in Shakespeare to offend the democratic mind; and there is no reason why an intelligent Tory should not praise Shakespeare for what Whitman deplored in him. There is every reason, however, why the portraiture of Shakespeare as a Tory, if it is to be done, should be done with grace, intelligence, and sureness of touch. Mr. Whibley throws all these qualifications to the winds, especially the second. The proof of Shakespeare's Toryism, for instance, which he draws from *Troilus and Cressida*, is based on a total misunderstanding of the famous and simple speech of Ulysses about the necessity of observing "degree, priority and place." Mr. Whibley, plunging blindly about

in Tory blinkers, imagines that in this speech Ulysses, or rather Shakespeare, is referring to the necessity of keeping the democracy in its place. "Might he not," he asks, "have written these prophetic lines with his mind's eye upon France of the Terror or upon modern Russia?" Had Mr. Whibley read the play with that small amount of self-forgetfulness without which no man has ever yet been able to appreciate literature, he would have discovered that it is the unruliness not of the democracy but of the aristocracy against which Ulysses—or, if you prefer it, Shakespeare—inveighs in this speech. The speech is aimed at the self-will and factiousness of Achilles and his disloyalty to Agamemnon. If there are any moderns who come under the noble lash of Ulysses, they must be sought for not among either French or Russian revolutionists, but in the persons of such sound Tories as Sir Edward Carson and such sound patriots as Mr. Lloyd George. It is tolerably certain that neither Ulysses nor Shakespeare foresaw Sir Edward Carson's escapades or Mr. Lloyd George's insubordinate career as a member of Mr. Asquith's Cabinet. But how admirably they sum up all the wild statesmanship of these later days in lines which Mr. Whibley, accountably enough, fails to quote :

They tax our policy, and call it cowardice ;
 Count wisdom as no member of the war ;
 Forestall prescience, and esteem no act
 But that of hand ; the still and mental parts—
 That do contrive how many hands shall strike,
 When fitness calls them on, and know, by measure
 Of their observant toil, the enemies' weight—
 Why, this hath not a finger's dignity.
 They call this bed-work, mappery, closet-war :
 So that the ram, that batters down the wall,
 For the great swing and rudeness of his poise,
 They place before his hand that made the engine,
 Or those that with the fineness of their souls
 By reason guide his execution.

There is not much in the moral of this speech to bring balm to the soul of the author of the *Letters of an Englishman*.

Mr. Whibley is not content, unfortunately, with having failed to grasp the point of *Troilus and Cressida*. He blunders with equal assiduity in regard to *Coriolanus*. He treats this play, not as a play about Coriolanus, but as a pamphlet in favour of Coriolanus. He has not been initiated, it seems, into the first secret of imaginative literature, which is that one may portray a hero sympathetically without making believe that his vices are virtues. Shakespeare no more endorses Coriolanus's patrician pride than he endorses Othello's jealousy or Macbeth's murderous ambition. Shakespeare was concerned with painting noble natures, not with pandering to their vices. He makes us sympathize with Coriolanus in his heroism, in his sufferings, in

his return to his better nature, in his death ; but from Shakespeare's point of view, as from most men's, the Nietzschean arrogance which led Coriolanus to become a traitor to his city is a theme for sadness, not (as apparently with Mr. Whibley) for enthusiasm. "Shakespeare," cries Mr. Whibley, as he quotes some of Coriolanus's anti-popular speeches, "will not let the people off. He pursues it with an irony of scorn." "There in a few lines," he writes of other speeches, "are expressed the eternal folly and shame of democracy. Ever committed to the worse cause, the people has not even the courage of its own opinions." It would be interesting to know whether in Mr. Whibley's eyes Coriolanus's hatred of the people is a sufficiently splendid virtue to cover his guilt in becoming a traitor. That good Tories have the right to become traitors was a gospel preached often enough in regard to the Ulster trouble before the war. It may be doubted, however, whether Shakespeare was sufficiently a Tory to foresee the necessity of such a gospel in *Coriolanus*. Certainly, the mother of Coriolanus, who was far from being a Radical, or even a mild Whig, preached the very opposite of the gospel of treason. She warned Coriolanus that his triumph over Rome would be a traitor's triumph, that his name would be "dogg'd with curses," and

that his character would be summed up in history in one fatal sentence :

The man was noble,
But with his last attempt he wiped it out,
Destroyed his country, and his name remains
To the ensuing age abhorr'd.

Mr. Whibley appears to loathe the mass of human beings so excessively that he does not quite realize the enormity (from the modern point of view) of Coriolanus's crime. It would, I agree, be foolish to judge Coriolanus too scrupulously from a modern point of view. But Mr. Whibley has asked us to accept the play as a tract for the times, and we must examine it as such in order to discover what Mr. Whibley means.

But, after all, Mr. Whibley's failure as a portrait-painter is a failure of the spirit even more than of the intellect. A narrow spirit cannot comprehend a magnanimous spirit, and Mr. Whibley's imagination does not move in that large Shakespearean world in which illustrious men salute their mortal enemies in immortal sentences of praise after the manner of

He was the noblest Roman of them all.

The author who is capable of writing Mr. Whibley's character-study of Fox does not understand enough about the splendour and the miseries of human

nature to write well on Shakespeare. Of Fox Mr. Whibley says :

He put no bounds upon his hatred of England, and he thought it not shameful to intrigue with foreigners against the safety and credit of the land to which he belonged. Wherever there was a foe to England, there was a friend of Fox. America, Ireland, France, each in turn inspired his enthusiasm. When Howe was victorious at Brooklyn, he publicly deplored "the terrible news." After Valmy he did not hesitate to express his joy. "No public event," he wrote, "not excepting Yorktown and Saratoga, ever happened that gave me so much delight. I could not allow myself to believe it for some days for fear of disappointment."

It does not seem to occur to Mr. Whibley that in regard to America, Ireland, and France, Fox was, according to the standard of every ideal for which the Allies professed to fight, tremendously right, and that, were it not for Yorktown and Valmy, America and France would not in our own time have been great free nations fighting against the embattled Whibleys of Germany. So far as Mr. Whibley's political philosophy goes, I see no reason why he should not have declared himself on the side of Germany. He believes in patriotism, it is true, but he is apparently a patriot of the sort that loves his country and hates his fellow-countrymen (if that is what he means by "the people," and presumably it must be). Mr. Whibley has the mind

of a German professor. His vehemence against the Germans for appreciating Shakespeare is strangely like a German professor's vehemence against the English for not appreciating him. "Why then," he asks,

should the Germans have attempted to lay violent hands upon our Shakespeare? It is but part of their general policy of pillage. Stealing comes as easy to them as it came to Bardolph and Nym, who in Calais stole a fire-shovel. Wherever they have gone they have cast a thievish eye upon what does not belong to them. They hit upon the happy plan of levying tolls upon starved Belgium. It was not enough for their greed to empty a country of food; they must extract something from its pocket, even though it be dying of hunger. . . . No doubt, if they came to these shores, they would feed their fury by scattering Shakespeare's dust to the winds of heaven. As they are unable to sack Stratford, they do what seems to them the next best thing: they hoist the Jolly Roger over Shakespeare's works.

Their arrogance is busy in vain. Shakespeare shall never be theirs. He was an English patriot, who would always have refused to bow the knee to an insolent alien.

This is mere foaming at the mouth—the tawdry violence of a Tory Thersites. This passage is a measure of the good sense and imagination Mr. Whibley brings to the study of Shakespeare. It is simply theatrical Jolly-Rogersm.